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LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: FROM A STATE  
OF CONFUSION TO A STATE OF BEING

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Gemma M. Barriteau

August 2016

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Gemma M. Barriteau

2016

**DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY**  
**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**  
**Department of Counseling, Psychology and Special Education**

***Dissertation***

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

**Executive Counselor Education and Supervision Program**

***Presented by:***

Gemma M. Barriteau  
B.A., Deviant Behavior & Social Control  
M.S.Ed., Community Mental Health Counseling

**August 2016**

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: FROM A STATE  
OF CONFUSION TO A STATE OF BEING

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## ABSTRACT

### LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: FROM A STATE OF CONFUSION TO A STATE OF BEING

By

Gemma M. Barriteau

August 2016

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Lisa Lopez Levers

The purpose of this study was to interpret the lived-experiences of some individuals who viewed their long-term committed relationships as a marriage. This was done in order to begin to reveal the underlying meaning of marriage for some people in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. This hermeneutic phenomenological study used Bowlby's (1969, 1982) Attachment Theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) Bio-ecological Model of Human Development to explore how married individuals bond with each other and adjust to their bio-ecological environments. Van Manen's (1990) Lived-Existentials were also used to interpret how these participants oriented to their lived experiences and interpreted their life stories.

Prior to the landmark Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruling in favor of national marriage equality, some members of society argued against marriage

equality for gay people. Recently, a few presidential candidates have threatened to overturn the ruling. Consequently, the debate over what marriage is and who deserves to be legally recognized as married has resurfaced in the national conscience. Although the Internet provides several interpretations of marriage, this study explores the deeper underlying meaning that some people place on their marital relationships, by hermeneutically interpreting their lived-experiences.

For this qualitative study, 12 persons (9 heterosexual and 3 homosexual) were interviewed about their marital relationships prior to the June 26, 2015 SCOTUS ruling on marriage equality. A Facebook social media page was created to solicit and inform potential participants of the study. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted and audio recorded. The results were summarized into four themes: The Freedom to be Vulnerable with One's Spouse; Communication beyond Words: Developing the Spiritual Connection; Safety; and Marriage as Union: Merging two into one.

Understanding the lived-experiences of persons engaged in what they describe as marital relationships, regardless of their sexual orientation, is essential to revealing the underlying meaning placed on marriage, which many feel is an expression of one's humanity. This understanding helps to assist members of the helping professions break down potential barriers that may lead to mental and physical health issues for their clients. The researcher offers suggestions for continued research in this area.

Keywords: definition, equality, lived-experience, marriage, same-sex

## DEDICATION

To all of the souls lost in Orlando and through different forms of hatred and to the memory of my big brother, Anthony Joseph Barriteau (1960-2010), who always let his little sister know that he was proud of her.

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As this has been a long and sometimes arduous journey for me, I would like to humbly acknowledge the following people for being a constant shining light in my life during this process: First to my parents who have passed over and who had instilled in me a love of learning: thank you, Ma and Dad. Dr. Olga Welch, Dean of the School of Education, thank you for keeping your door open to me and for always encouraging my growth. To Dr. Lisa Lopez Levers, my dissertation chair, thank you for your help through this process. To Drs. James Henderson, Moni McIntyre, and Debra Hyatt-Burkhart, members of my dissertation committee, thank you for selflessly supporting, teaching, and encouraging me, and to Dr. Linda Goodfellow, the IRB chair, thank you for your support, patience, and humor.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the right to marriage in the United States was afforded to only heterosexual men and women. On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruled that marriage was guaranteed to all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, under the Constitution of the United States. Although marriage equality for gay people is now law in the United States, many people continue to contend that marriage should be granted to only heterosexual couples (Rainey & Lepine, 2013; Schlesinger, 2016; Sprigg, 2016). Over the past 20 years or more, varying opinions about what marriage is and who deserves its benefits had been expressed by members of political parties, religious leaders, academia, the helping professions, and the public at large (Masci & Lipka, 2015; McNeill, 1993; Mikka, 2013; Mohr, 1997; Newcomb, 2013; Rainey & Lepine, 2013; Rudow, 2013; Wardle, 2006; Wolfson, 2004). Public discourse about marriage, specifically the right for gay people to marry, ignited emotional outrage for some and a steadfast determination to fight for marriage equality for others (Wolfson, 2004). In addition, public discourse brought attention to the fact that there are several definitions of marriage currently in use (Steinmetz, 2013). As a result, understanding what marriage *is* remains a source of confusion for people across the nation (Keller & Keller, 2011; Nazworth, 2015; Schall, 2015; Nunberg, 2013; Green, 2015).

Gay Lesbian Advocates and Defenders' (GLAD) Mary Bonauto, the lead investigator on marriage equality for *Freedom to Marry*, the campaign to win marriage equality, learned that "...on the federal level, there was no standard answer for what constituted a marriage to the federal government. Agencies had their own practices,

which in most cases were guided not by law, but by regulation or custom” (Solomon, 2015, pg. 335). In describing the emotion that lived undersurface during the many discussions he had on marriage, Marc Solomon (2015), the national campaign director for *Freedom to Marry*, described marriage as “one of those issues that like abortion or the death penalty, [came] along every few decades or so. Remarks [about marriage] swung from emotionally high to analytical” (pp. 211-212).

Throughout the United States the word marriage conjures up different meanings for different people (Savage, 2004). As Evan Wolfson (2004), founder and president of *Freedom to Marry* illustrates,

First, marriage is a personal commitment and an important choice that belongs to couples in love. ...It is a relationship between people who are, hopefully in love and an undertaking that most couples hope will endure. Marriage is also a social statement, preeminently describing and defining a person’s relationships and place in society. ...Marriage is also a relationship between a couple and the government. Couples need the government’s participation to get into and out of a marriage (p.4).

In addition, for some it is only a legal contract with varying degrees of benefits that depict social status; for others, it is only a religious rite that binds partners together for life; and still for others, it is only a cultural and social practice (Brake, 2012, p. 1). As a result of these different views, marriage has varying forms, which include monogamy, polygamy, and group marriage.

*Monogamy* is the “practice or state of being married to one person at a time” (Jewel, 2002, p. 535). Although monogamy in the United States had formerly involved

only one husband (male) and one wife (female), it now includes what some refer to as same-sex marriage, marriage between either two men or two women. *Polygamy*, which is an umbrella term for plural marriages, includes: *bigamy*—one person having two spouses, *polygyny*—one husband having several wives, *polyandry*—one wife having several husbands, and *group marriage*—several husbands having several wives or vice versa (Giddens, Duneier, Appelbaum, & Carr, 2013). Although the latest Supreme Court ruling remains a source of contention for some, monogamy continues to be the preferred form of marriage for most Americans and the only legal form of marriage in the United States (Mooney, Knox, & Schacht, 2013; Williams & Abdullah, 2015). However, while monogamy is the most common form of marriage in the world, polygyny appears to be the “ideal [form] of marriage among preindustrial societies” (Hendrix, 2003, p. 75).

One can presume that the confusion and debate over what marriage is and who deserves its benefits stems from the fact that in the United States marriage means so many things to so many people (Savage, 2004; Wolfson, 2004). Given the reactions over the past decade both in favor of and against the idea of gay people marrying, one also can presume that there is a deeper meaning placed on the marriage relationship than meets the eye. Peter Wood (2011), anthropologist and president of the National Association of Scholars states, “People marry because it means something beyond a private choice, and we have good reason to concern ourselves with that broader meaning” (para. 8).

The current marriage study takes an in-depth look at the lived-experiences of some heterosexual and homosexual individuals’ committed relationships that they view as a marriage. It interprets, hermeneutically, how these couples and individuals made meaning of their marriages, and reveals the broader meaning of marriage, to which Wood

(2011) refers. For the purpose of this research, marriage is viewed as the day-to-day, monogamous, cohabiting romantic relationship that one individual shares with another of his or her choosing. (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Casper, Cohen, & Simmons, 1999; Collins & Reed, 1990; Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012; Doherty, 2015).

### **Background of the Problem**

Prior to the recent decision handed down by the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), which stated that gay people have the right to marry and have their marriages recognized across all 50 states, debate over marriage equality for gay people had been ignited among some religiously and politically conservative members of society and their liberal counterparts (Baird & Rosenbaum, 2004; Bush, 2004; Calmes & Baker, 2012; Cherlin, 2004; Cole, 1996; Focus on the Family, 2008; Gallaher, 2004; McNeill, 1993; Mohr, 1997). Those in favor of marriage for same-sex couples were of the opinion that one's sexual orientation should not stand in the way of a loving, committed relationship and the benefits awarded to such relationships (Wolfson, 2004), while some conservative policy makers and religious leaders had concluded that the legalization of marriage between two persons of the same sex threatened the sanctity of the institution (Focus on the Family, 2008). Claims by conservative leaders had been made that stated that gay marriage would weaken respect for the institution and change what they understood to be the definition of marriage (Bush, 2004; Cherlin, 2004; Focus on the Family, 2008; Gallagher, 2004; Lipp, 2013; Mathabane, 2004; Wood, 2011).



According to Former Michigan Solicitor General and attorney John Bursch, The only legitimate purpose of marriage is to bind children with their biological parents. If gay couples can marry, he argued, that would change that definition, which would lead to fewer straight couples marrying. As a result, more children would be born out of wedlock, with resultant harms (Solomon, 2015, p. 358).

Bursch's statement on same-sex marriage reveals a fear at the possible loss of what some people see as American values, which are rooted in families with two heterosexual parents (Baird & Rosenbaum, 2004). However, for many, the apprehension surrounding marriage between same-sex partners is rooted in religious doctrine (Call & Heaton, 1997; Masci & Lipka, 2015; Waldman, 2003). According to the *CIA World Fact Book* (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013), the top five religious affiliations in the United States are: Protestant (51.3%), Roman Catholic (23.9%), Other Christian (1.6%), Mormon (1.7%), and Jewish (1.7%) (para. 4).

Religion once played, and in many parts of America, continues to play a dominant role in how people define and view marriage (Call & Heaton, 1997; Waite & Leher, 2003). Some Christians around the world who follow biblical teachings believe that marriage is the holy union of a man and a woman that was defined and created by God (Desai, 2007). Many Christians refer to Genesis 2:21-24 as proof that the idea of marriage between one man and one woman was established by God in the very creation of humanity (Alexander, 1996; Cole, 1996; Kostenberger, 2016). Others turn to Paul's letters to the Corinthians, in which Paul answers questions concerning marriage, as proof that only man and woman can be bonded through matrimony (Kostenberger, 2016).

According to Pope John Paul II, during his February 2001, *Address to the Prelate Auditors, Officials and Advocates of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota*, “Marriage is not just any union between human persons that can be formed according to a variety of cultural models. Man and woman experience in themselves the natural inclination to be joined in marriage” (Wojtyla, 2001, Section 4, para. 3). However, arguments over biblical teachings and what those teachings say about homosexuality and marriage continue (Catholic Answers, 2004; Gay Christian Network, 2016; ProCon.org, 2016; Vines, 2015). These issues have become a recent concern for the global Anglican Communion:

Caroline Wyatt (2016), religious affairs correspondent reporting for the *BBC News* recently stated:

With equal marriage now part of civil law in England, the Church’s insistence that it should not form part of Canon law is increasingly contested by some of its own clergy and members of its congregation. The strength of feeling over the issue in England was made clear in a heartfelt open letter to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on Sunday [1/10/16], which called on the Church to repent over its treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans Christians as ‘second class citizens’ over issues of sexuality. (para. 24-25)

The traditional views held by some factions of Christianity also are felt in other religions. For example, those who practice Judaism believe that the person one marries is the person one is destined to be with, one’s *bashert*, which literally means fate or destiny (Rich, 2012). Katz (2013) states, “Both the Torah and the Talmud view a man without a wife, or a woman without a husband, as incomplete. ‘A man who has no wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness’” (para. 1).

Mormons, persons who follow the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (L.D.S.), had at one time practiced polygamy, specifically polygyny (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2016). Joseph Smith organized the L.D.S. church in 1830. Approximately one year later, he received a revelation from the Lord that the new church should emulate the Old Testament prophets in the practice of having plural wives:

Vs. 1. Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph, that inasmuch as you have inquired of my hand to know and understand wherein I, the Lord, justified my servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and also Moses, David and Solomon, my servants as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines. (Ingoldsby, 1989, p. 389)

After Smith's murder in 1844, Brigham Young, the Church's new prophet, brought the church to Salt Lake Valley, Utah, and, because of the undue pressures and legal actions taken against them for practicing polygyny, "Wilford Woodruff [the fourth president of the Mormon church] declared in 1890 that the practice of plural marriage had ended" (Ingoldsby, 1989, p. 390). Today, factions of many Christian churches, including the Mormon religion, have detached from some Christian dogma to become gay inclusive (Affirmation.org, 2016; Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists, 2016; Gaychurch.org, 2003-2016).

Regardless of what one's religious beliefs are, monogamous marriage is the preferred form of marriage by most men and women in Western civilization, while some continue to believe that heterosexual, monogamous marriage should continue to be the foremost-recognized relationship in the United States (Focus on the Family, 2008; Price,

2011). Emeritus professor at the University of Illinois, Richard Mohr (1997), states that marriage is how people “define their lives and ... identities” (Baird & Rosenbaum, 1997, p. 106). This statement reveals the importance that marriage holds for many people in today’s society. In the United States, federally recognized monogamous marriage has an impact on one’s social, economic, and political status, while, for some, marriage is believed to lead to the procreation of the human species (Brake, 2012). According to the late former senator, the Honorable Jesse Helms, the institution of marriage is “the keystone and the arch of civilization” (Baird & Rosenbaum, 1997, p. 22).

American Attorney, gay rights activist, author, and founder and president of Freedom to Marry, Evan Wolfson (2004) describes marriage as

A specific relationship of love and dedication to another person. It is how we explain the families that are united because of that love. And it universally signifies a level of self-sacrifice and responsibility and a stage of life unlike any other. (p. 3)

It is important to note, however, that there are some conservative and liberal religious, heterosexual and gay people who prefer not to identify their long-term committed relationships as marriages. They take the stand that their loving committed relationships do not need federal or societal validation:

“I think that a lot of people like the kind of organic nature that your relationship takes on when you decide not to marry,” says Julie Bluhm, 31, a Minneapolis, Minnesota-based clinical social worker and a board member of the Alternatives to Marriage Project, a national nonprofit organization advocating equality for

unmarried people. “It’s almost a deeper appreciation of their relationship and the privacy of it.” (Voo, 2007, para. 11)

### **Statement of the Problem**

An integral part of the human condition involves the coming together of individuals for the emotional support, survival, evolution, and betterment of the species (Coontz, 2005). Monogamous marriage, for most people living in the United States has been the method used to reach these objectives. As stated earlier, marriage means many different things to many people (Brake, 2012; Savage, 2004; Wolfson, 2004). In the following paragraphs, marriage is described as the embodiment of a social contradiction, which may have contributed to the confusion society appears to have when it shares discourse about what marriage is (Green, 2015; Keller & Keller, 2011; Nazworth, 2015; Nunberg, 2013; Schall, 2015).

According to Pollock (2003), marriage as a social institution in Western society, for the years prior to the latest SCOTUS ruling on marriage equality, is “assumed to involve the following: the legal union of a man and a woman” with possible associations with the couple’s families; “approved sexual cohabitation of one man with one woman, with specified prohibitions against cohabitation between those closely related” blood relations; “the procreation of children”; control of children and property; support of the household through the division of labor “according to age and gender”; and a male dominated hierarchy (p. 86). Pollack (2003) explains the introduction of marriage into Western society in the following way:

Marriage was introduced by Western missionaries as a religious institution which reflected their desire to ensure family stability through the legitimate

procreation of children, and hence ensure inheritance down a male line.

Missionaries had no other way of conceptualizing family stability. In promoting this ideology, they were calling into question, the very foundations of the society into which they had come. Anthropologists and other social scientists have reinforced this view of the central importance of marriage, by emphasizing the Western model of the family as universal, and kinship as a blood relationship between children and parents, which comes from the union of the reproductive pair. (Pollack, 2003, p.86)

In stark contrast to the importance that lay at the foundation of the creation of marriage as a sacred institution, the media has presented marriage as a form of entertainment for the masses (IMDb, 2002). In 2004, the *American Broadcasting Company* (ABC) was in its fifth season of the popular reality television show, *The Bachelor*, which debuted on March 25, 2002. The plot of the show involved a single eligible bachelor who was introduced to, usually, twenty-five women deemed to be his romantic interests. Of these twenty-five women, the bachelor eliminated candidates throughout the course of the season, and was expected to propose marriage to the final contestant.

The *Bachelor* is currently in its 20<sup>th</sup> season and has had several spin-offs (*The Bachelorette*, *Bachelor Pad* series, and the *Bachelor in Paradise*) as well as several copycat shows (*Dating Naked*, *The Millionaire Matchmaker*, *Flavor of Love*, *I Love New York*, *Rock of Love*, and *Married at First Sight*). Reality television shows appeared to trivialize the sacred institution that marriage is for many Americans (Halberstam, 2004; Vranjican, 2014), while simultaneously, conflict was occurring in American society over

who deserved the right to partake of and benefit from this revered and holy institution (Grofum, 2013; Jouet, 2012). The push to stop gay people from marrying, which led to laws like the *Defense of Marriage Act*, seemed to be more important than the media's portrayal of marriage on television (Vranjican, 2014).

On September 21, 1996, the *Defense of Marriage Act* (DOMA) was signed into law by President Bill Clinton. DOMA was a federal law that, prior to being ruled unconstitutional, defined marriage for federal purposes, as the legal union between only “one man and one woman as husband and wife” (Sec. 3, para. 1) and the term spouse as “a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or wife” (Sec. 3, para. 1). DOMA also allowed states not to recognize same-sex unions granted in other states (Sec. 2, para. 1). Hundreds of same-sex couples living throughout the United States found themselves being treated differently by the United States government because Sections 2 and 3 of DOMA discriminated against “lawfully married same-sex couples” by ... “[allowing] states to refuse to recognize valid civil marriages of same-sex couples” and by leaving married same-sex couples “out of all federal statutes, regulations, and rulings applicable to all other married people—thereby denying them over 1,100 federal benefits and protections” (Human Rights Campaign, 2016, para. 1).

For Edith Windsor and Thea Spyer, a same-sex couple who married in Canada in 2007 after 40 years together, and resided in New York (one of the few states in 2008 to recognize same-sex marriages), getting married was a life-long dream. However, when Spyer died in 2009, leaving her entire estate to Windsor, Windsor was faced with the fact that her union to Thea, which she recognized as a marriage, was not viewed in the same way by the United States federal government (Supreme Court of the United States, 2012).

When Windsor tried to claim the federal estate tax exemption for surviving spouses, she was denied under Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) (1996) (Supreme Court of the United States, 2012).

The climate for gay people living in the United States seemed more volatile than in previous years (Mustanski, 2013). On January 20, 2004, President George W. Bush, during his State of the Union Address, presented an argument against the legalization of marriage for persons of the same sex. He stated,

Decisions children now make can affect their health and character for the rest of their lives. All of us—parents and schools and government—must work together to counter the negative influence of the culture and to send the right messages to our children. A strong America must also value the institution of marriage. I believe we should respect individuals as we take a principled stand for one of the most fundamental, enduring institutions of our civilization. (Bush, 2004, para. 60)

One can infer that the “negative influence of the culture” to which Bush (2004) referred was the stereotype assigned to gay people as a result of formulaic generalizations based on homosexual orientation. *Homophobia* is the term that describes the irrational fear, aversion, or hatred that some members of society have toward people who have a homosexual orientation (Anderson, 2016; Weinberg, 1972). Fallon and Seem (2012) state, “Heterosexual orientation is viewed as the norm, and thus, minority sexual orientations are seen as lacking, not normal, and sometimes deviant” (p. 301).

The term homophobia has been replaced by some academics and gay rights advocates with the term “homoprejudice” (Logan, 1996, abstract). According to the *Oxford Dictionary* online, the term prejudice is “an unreasonable dislike of or preference



for a person, group, custom, etc., especially when it is based on their race, religion, sex, etc.” (Prejudice, 2015, para. 1). Homoprejudice, therefore, is the unreasonable dislike for a person or group based on their homosexual orientation. President Bush (2004) closed the marriage portion of his address by stating,

Congress has already taken a stand on this issue by passing the Defense of Marriage Act, signed in 1996 by President Clinton....On an issue of such great consequence, the people’s voice must be heard. If judges insist on forcing their arbitrary will upon the people, the only alternative left to the people would be the constitutional process. Our nation must defend the sanctity of marriage. (para. 61-62)

Bush (2004) did not provide a valid reason for opposing marriage equality; his only statement came in the form of bias and concluded with the assumption that same-sex couples who wanted to marry and their supporters did not value the institution of marriage (para 62). The historical circumstances that oppose homosexuality stem as far back as the start of the Roman Empire; and, although George W. Bush reportedly was viewed as “one of the worst presidents” (Walsh, 2009, para. 5) in American history, according to a survey conducted by the cable network C-SPAN, which consisted of 65 presidential historians and scholars, on the issue of marriage, many Americans at the time appeared to share his values and goals (PEW Research Center, 2015).

Bush’s statement on marriage equality was met with praise by conservative Republicans and outrage by liberal Democrats (Blumenthal, 2012; Republicanviews.org, 2013). Many supporters of the marriage ban believed that “an amendment was needed to protect the foundation of American society” (CNN.com, 2004, para.3). In November

2008, Proposition 8, informally referred to as Prop 8, a California ballot proposition and state constitutional amendment that defined marriage as existing only between one man and one woman, passed in that state, and the clash of attitudes and opinions for and against homosexuals marrying in the United States continued (Cohen, 2009).

In 2004, Evan Wolfson's primer on marriage equality was published. His book, *Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People's Right to Marry*, tackled the questions and fears that repeatedly surfaced in the country's national conscience. In it he offered straight forward answers to these questions and shed light on why marriage is humanly significant in the lives of all people who endeavor to live their lives this way.

The constitutionality of DOMA was contested in the Supreme Court of the United States and repealed on June 26, 2013. A few hours later, the case [Hollingsworth v Perry], that supported Prop 8 was "remanded with instructions to dismiss the appeal for lack of jurisdiction" (Sacks, Siddiqui, & Reilly, 2013, para. 5). Exactly two years later, the Supreme Court ruled that marriage equality was guaranteed for all citizens, regardless of sexual orientation, under the Constitution of the United States. Wolfson (2004) and his organizers realized that

The one thing that could break through the fear [of same sex marriage] was allowing lawmakers to get to know [gay] married couples and their families. When they did, they would understand viscerally that these families were not much different from their own and that they should treat gay families as they'd want their own family to be treated. (Solomon, 2014, p. 79)

Wolfson's (2004) assumption was correct, and his plan to bring understanding to lawmakers helped win marriage equality. However, those who disagreed with the

SCOTUS ruling reignited national debate over what marriage is and who is entitled to its' rewards (Grofum, 2013; Jouviet, 2012). And even though there are several articles on the Internet and in bookstores and libraries that discuss different aspects of marriage, there appears to be a lack of clarity and understanding in the national discussion that pertains to the underlying "broader meaning" of marriage to which Wood (2011) had referred. This lack of clarity may be partial reason for the confusion that impedes a clear and accurate understanding of what marriage actually *is*.

The decline in the number of marriages and the increase in divorce and cohabitation rates have been well documented (Kreider, 2010; National Center for Health Statistics, 2012, 2002; Rogers & Thornton, 1985; Smock, 2000; U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2012). However, the war against marriage equality had obfuscated the real problem, which was that the decline in marriage rates was, at the start of this research project, a heterosexual phenomenon that may have benefitted from exploration of the relationship itself. In her research on cohabitation, Smock (2000) states, "[t]o say that cohabitation is like or unlike marriage is useful only to the extent that we have adequate knowledge of what marriage is indeed 'like'" (p. 12). The purpose of this present research is to discover that knowledge, because understanding how individuals relate to each other in relationships that they view as marriages, regardless of their sexual orientation, reveals the importance of the marriage relationship on the betterment of the human species.

In order to understand the meaning that is placed on the marital relationship by all people in the United States who view their relationships as marriages, it is imperative that the conditions attributed to it are examined. Therefore, no discussion of the federal

benefits that were awarded to couples prior to or after the Supreme Court's rulings on DOMA, Proposition 8, and the Supreme Court's most recent ruling, which granted national marriage equality for same-sex couples, was entertained in order to focus solely on the intimate, naturally developing relationship experienced by the individual or couple. The lived experience of the marital relationship is what is being assessed.

Mackey, O'Brien, and Mackey (1997) conducted related research whereby they studied "seventy-two partners (respondents) from thirty-six relationships that had lasted at least fifteen years" (p. 176). Their study used "a multidimensional perspective for exploring and understanding how these partners adapted to each other over time and how relationships developed over the years" (p. xiv). They found that "[overall] patterns from early through recent years in roles, relational fit, conflict and its management, decision making, and sexual and psychological intimacy were similar regardless of the sexual orientations of respondents" (p. 172).

Prior to the latest SCOTUS ruling, some politicians and members of conservative religious groups had focused their attention on hindering the success of people struggling for marriage equality (SIECUS, 2004; Tashman, 2015). As the current presidential contest heats up, conservative candidates continue to threaten to undo the marriage equality ruling. American real estate developer and front running republican candidate, Donald Trump "has suggested that he would seek to overturn last summer's landmark ruling legalizing same-sex marriage in the U.S." (Danner, 2016, p.1) while many conservative people continue to equivocate from the factors that made marriage a less desirable institution for heterosexual people by failing to recognize the following.

First, the group who had directly and negatively affected the institution of marriage prior to the current SCOTUS ruling was most likely predominantly heterosexual in orientation since legal marriages were only granted to heterosexual couples. There is no available statistic that provides the percentage of divorces that occurred in the United States as a result of a spouse's discovery that he or she is homosexual. It is highly probable that this statistic may be buried in the number of divorces that occur as a result of marital infidelity. Infidelity is the "action or state of being unfaithful to a spouse or other sexual partner" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015b, para. 1).

According to William J. Doherty (2015), professor and director of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project at the University of Minnesota and a practicing marriage and family therapist, "Infidelity is one of the leading causes of divorce; it nearly doubles the chance that a couple will get divorced" (p. 50). However, because no such statistic has been made available, one can deduce that the number of marriages affected by discovering that one's spouse is homosexual is minimal in comparison to reasons such as education, income, rise in cohabitation, and change in spousal roles.

Second, something had shifted in heterosexual marriages that led to the decline in marriage rates over the past century. As previously stated, a Pew Research Center/TIME magazine (2010) study that examined the "transformative trends of the past 50 years that have led to a sharp decline in marriage and a rise of new family forms" (p. i), indicates that education level, income, economic security, generational differences, public ambivalence, changing spousal roles, and a rise in cohabitation all play significant parts in the decline in marriage.

Third, it was presumed that the legalization of same-sex marriage prior to the SCOTUS ruling may have increased the number of legal marriages and, therefore, could not have negatively affected an institution that was already in decline (Congressional Budget Office, 2004, para. 3). Shedding light on these factors leads one to refer back to Smock's (2000) original statement where she ponders what marriage is indeed *like*.

The problem is that marriage in 21st century America has been confounded by politics, religious prejudices, homophobia, and an overall attitude by some Americans that the institution of marriage does not hold the same significance it once did. These attitudes have created an inconsistency in how marriage is viewed and more importantly, have made it difficult for Americans to come to a clear understanding of the underlying meaning of marriage that appears to be important to many Americans and that seems to be at the root of the conflict over marriage equality. Discovering the underlying meaning that individuals and couples place on their lived-experiences of marriage, without the interference of these obstructions is the goal of this study. Capturing and recording the feelings that these participants applied to their lived-experiences of marriage is tantamount to understanding human development.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived-experiences of people who had lived in committed relationships that they viewed as marriage, in order to draw out what the underlying meaning of the marital relationship was for them. Participation was limited to persons with either heterosexual or homosexual orientations in order to determine if their lived-experiences of marriage was similar or had differed in any way. This study is important, because it provides a "full

interpretive description” (van Manen, 1990, p. 18) of the marriage relationship as it is experienced by some heterosexual and homosexual people in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. In this way it adds to the literature, specifically to the 1997 study conducted by Mackey, O’Brien, and Mackey that studied heterosexual and homosexual couples and focused on “how individuals in committed relationships adapt to each other as they live out their lives together from the early years of their relationships...” (Mackey et al., 1997, Preface).

The focus of this study was to shed light on the lived-experience of the marriage relationship in a way that illuminated the underlying meaning of marriage for these participants. Mohr (1997), in his analysis of marriage, proposed that understanding the nature and meaning of marriage is vital. He also suggested that “the lived experience of gay couples not only shows them as fulfilling the norms of marriage but can even indicate ways of improving marital law for everyone” (Baird & Rosenbaum, 1997, p. 86). This sentiment is supported by Jesuit priest, psychotherapist and theologian, Father John J. McNeill (1993), who wrote,

Traditionally the married relationship between male and female found its support and stability in social roles, customs, and laws which rendered relatively secondary the type of direct personal relationship between the parties involved. But all these social supports are fast fading away, with the result that, as we have already observed, the divorce rate in the United States has been reported to be rapidly approaching the fifty-percent mark.... If the homosexual community were allowed to play its role in society with full acceptance ...they could potentially be a help in leading society to a new and better understanding of interpersonal love

between equals--rather than the role-playing of tradition--as the foundation of the marriage relationship. (p. 137) The current study advances such understanding and analysis.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to understand and interpret the lived-experiences of gay and heterosexual persons whose long-term committed relationships were viewed by the participants as marriages. The study also aims to illuminate the underlying meaning of marriage for these individuals by focusing the discussion on their intimate relationships and not on the federal benefits awarded to some couples prior to and after DOMA, Prop 8, and the most recent Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality. In this way, the focus of the study remains on the developing marital relationship. To interpret responses hermeneutically, I used van Manen's (1990) lifeworld themes, which he refers to as "existentials," as a guide. They are *lived-time*, *lived-space*, *lived-body*, and *lived-human relation*. These existentials are explained in more detail in the following chapters.

The following question is used as a guide to inform this inquiry:

- ❖ How do people in perceived marital relationships make meaning of their marriages?

The following subsidiary questions, which aid in answering the guiding question, include:

1. How do middle to older-aged homosexual and heterosexual adults experience commitment in their perceived marital relationships?



2. How does the meaning that people apply to their marriages help to define marriage in 21<sup>st</sup> century America?
3. How do lived-experiences of same-sex couples in perceived marital relationships differ from those of their heterosexual counterparts?
4. What do these experiences say about marital experiences?

### **Conducting Semi-structured Interviews: Protocols and Procedures**

A qualitative approach to research “seeks to discover the everyday lived world of the interviewee” (Shank, 2006, p. 46). To accomplish this task, I chose to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews. “In-depth interviews are optimal for collecting data on individuals’ personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being explored” (Mack et al., 2005, p. 2). The semi-structured interview is unique in how it “employs a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up *why* or *how* questions” (Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010, p. 366). These how and why questions are used to encourage the participant to share his or her lived experiences on a deeper, more meaningful level. In this way the probing questions guide the interview discussion, consequently illuminating key, meaningful themes that the participants experience in their everyday lived world, and ultimately shed light on the underlying meaning made of the participants’ lived-experiences of marriage (Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010).

Examples of probing questions used to conduct this inquiry include the following:  
(The Interview Protocol can be found in Appendix B)

1. How do you define marriage?
  - a. How has your definition changed over the years?
  - b. Describe some experiences that helped you create your definition of marriage?
2. At what point in your relationship did you feel married to your spouse?
  - a. Describe in detail the emotion(s) you experienced when you felt married to your spouse.
  - b. How much value do you place on being married?
3. How would you describe the experience of being married to a person who has never experienced it?
  - a. What does being married feel like?
  - b. How did you know when your spouse was the “one”?

### **Delimitations of the Study**

Delimitations in a research study are the choices that the researcher makes to not do certain things; they are the boundaries that the researcher sets for the study (PhDStudent.com, 2016). Purposive homogenous sampling, a sampling technique that is based on the acumen of the researcher and that focuses primarily on specific characteristics of interest in the population (Lund Research Ltd., 2012) was used to select the participants for this study. The current study was only open to homosexual and heterosexual persons between the ages of 30 and 85 who were living in the United States and who were U. S. citizens. Because the discourse concerning marriage equality in the

U.S. had been centered on these two groups, specifically, (Anderson, 2016; Jouvett, 2012; Grovum, 2013; Savage, 2004; SIECUS, 2004; Tashman, 2015; Weinberg, 1972) it was my intention to shed light on how heterosexual and homosexual persons, who had or were currently engaged in relationships that they viewed as a marriage, interpreted their lived-experiences of their marital relationships, consequently defining marriage for them.

The age range was chosen in order to gather as many people as possible who had for several years, engaged in what they perceived to be a marital relationship with the idea that the longer the relationship, the more robust the information reported would be. Individuals were selected based on their similar characteristics—in this case, long-term relationships that were viewed as marriages by the participants, heterosexual and homosexual orientations, and citizenship in the United States. It is important to note that the sample being studied is not representative of the entire population, but is relevant to this study because of its qualitative nature.

This research relied on the reporting of individuals who were capable of expressing their lived-experiences philosophically or spiritually, rather than by examining the roles that were assumed by the partners in the relationship. It was my belief that the participants' ability to articulate their lived-experiences of married life would provide a unique understanding of the underlying meaning and value placed on marriage. Moreover, I viewed each individual's lived-experience to their spouse and environment as intimately interconnected. All interviews were recorded. This course of study was chosen because prior to and since the 2015 SCOTUS ruling on marriage equality, many discussions have taken place in society concerning what marriage is and who deserves to partake in and benefit from legal monogamous marriages in the United States (Grovum,

2013; Jouvett, 2012; Savage, 2004; SIECUS, 2004; Tashman, 2015). Understanding the lived-experience of marriage for these participants might help to bring to light the underlying meaning of marriage and draw attention to a different perspective of what marriage actually is.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The most obvious and significant limitation to conducting research such as this is the inability of the researcher to interview *all* of the people in the United States who have been in relationships that they view as marriages. Therefore, sample size, in addition to lack of prior research on the topic, and self-reported data are all limitations of this study. Because self-reported data, information that an individual recall, can rarely be independently verified, there is a potential for bias ((LibGuides, Sacred Heart University Library, 2015). These biases can be found in the following ways:

- Selective memory (remembering or not remembering experiences or events that occurred at some point in the past);
- Telescoping (recalling events that occurred at one time as if they occurred at another time);
- Attribution (the act of attributing positive events and outcomes to one's own agency but attributing negative events and outcomes to external forces); and
- Exaggeration (the act of representing outcomes or embellishing events as more significant than is actually suggested from other data (LibGuides, Sacred Heart University Library, 2015, para. 5).

Finally, the skill level of the researcher/interviewer will always have an impact on the research and may be considered a limitation of this study. It is for this reason that the researcher was supervised by a professional with over 25 years of qualitative research experience.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is grounded in a theoretical framework that is comprised of Adult Attachment Theory, van Manen's (1990) Lived-existentials, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) Bio-ecological Model of Human Development. Adult Attachment Theory emerged from Attachment Theory, which was developed by John Bowlby (1969/1982) and later expanded upon by Mary Ainsworth (1978). In brief, Attachment Theory originated from a request of the then World Health Organization (WHO) Chief of Mental Health, Ronald Hargreaves, who requisitioned a report in early 1951 from psychologist Bowlby, on the mental health needs of homeless children (Bowlby, 1988, p. 21).

What Bowlby (1988) found was that the early bonds formed between a child and his or her caregiver(s) had a tremendous impact on the child and continued throughout the development of the child's life.

Attachment theory was formulated to explain certain patterns of behavior, characteristic not only of infants and young children but also adolescents and adults that were formerly conceptualized in terms of dependency and over-dependency.... Historically the theory was developed out of the object-relations tradition in psychoanalysis; but it has drawn also on concepts from evolution theory, ethology, control theory, and cognitive psychology. (pp. 119-120)

Adult attachment theory takes this premise and applies it to adult relationships. Colin (1996) explains, “Attachment figures are, by definition, the specific individuals you seek out and want to depend on when you need protection and care” (p. 294). The use of Adult Attachment theory in this framework made it possible to understand how bonds are formulated in relationships that are viewed as marital.

Van Manen’s (1990) theory of lived-existentials delves into the concepts of *lived-time* (temporality), *lived-space* (spatiality), *lived-body* (corporeality), and *lived-human relation* (relationality or communality). These ideas, originated by existentialist philosopher and mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), speak to how humans experience their *lifeworld*. As a part of this framework, van Manen’s Four Existentials are used as guides to understanding and interpreting the lived-experiences of marriage as reported by the participants in this study. An example of a statement made and interpreted existentially would be, “When we are together, I feel as if time stands still.” The concept of time ceasing to move forward is a feeling one experiences, but one that becomes invalidated once the clock on the wall has told us that time has indeed passed. Another such example would be: “My heart skips a beat just thinking about the relationship we have and the life we’ve built together.” This statement reflects lived-body, the experience of feeling physical bodily senses at the thought of the relationship. These types of experiences reflect the lived-world of the person sharing them.

Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Model of Human Development (1979, 2005) is key here, as the model scientifically studies human beings as they interact and grow within ever-changing environments. Bronfenbrenner (1979) had developed a series of systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) that

outlines the structure of the bio-ecological environment. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) points out, these interrelated systems have an impact on each other and the individuals or groups living within them. As a part of this framework, his theory serves to provide an understanding of how humans, behaving relationally in marriage, are affected by their surrounding world and its systems, consequently defining and redefining marriage.

### **Implications**

The abundance of literature on the topic of marriage made this research seem somewhat daunting at the start. Sifting through papers, articles, journals, books, and news clippings in search of one article that explored how society interprets marriage seemed a Sisyphean task. The goal of this research, from initial impulse, was to understand and interpret the lived-experiences of individuals who had been or were currently living in relationships that they viewed as marriages, in order to bring to light the underlying meaning of the marital relationship. I aimed to influence society-at-large positively by transforming the negative attitudes that some people have that affect marginalized communities of people across the country who are fighting for acceptance of their relationships, and understanding of their true nature. Such dispositional change also may benefit professionals who have not sufficiently reflected on their personal biases with regard to this topic.

Counselors and other mental health professionals can benefit from learning how couples and individuals who have experienced marriage make meaning of their relationships. For example, depression, which is inherent in all *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV-TR* (DSM-IV-TR) Mood Disorder classifications (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), has an effect on all aspects of an individual's

life: marriage, work, and daily activities. Through this new information, those in the helping professions may be able to approach their clients' clinical assessments and therapies from a more informed perspective, thus helping clients to make more realistic decisions about their relationships, which in turn may lead to happier lives.

As more and more cultures inhabit the United States, counselors and other mental health professionals will be faced with issues that will challenge their cultural sensitivities. The results of this research offer counselors and other mental health professionals who do not have experience with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) populations the opportunity to gain cultural sensitivity and awareness that some of the issues that may arise in gay relationships, are similar to those that they encounter in heterosexual relationships.

The Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC), a division of the American Counseling Association (ACA) has written in their competencies the following:

Competent counselors will recognize how internalized prejudice, including heterosexism, racism, classism, religious/spiritual discrimination, ableism, adultism, ageism and sexism, may influence the counselor's own attitudes as well as those of their LGBQQ individuals, resulting in negative attitudes and or feelings towards LGBQQ individuals. (ALGBTIC 2013, p. 11)

This research on marriage offers a clear understanding of the lived-experiences of some heterosexual and homosexual individuals that is free of the prejudices and stereotypes that all human beings, regardless of sexual orientation or profession, fall prey to at one time or another. Finally, approaching the marriage relationship through



hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry allows marriage to be viewed through a new lens, one that adds to the literature and also will provide a more meaningful and spiritual interpretation to the lived experience of marriage, consequently resulting in more sustainable unions and a mentally healthier society.

### **Summary**

Over the last 20 or more years, the idea that only heterosexual couples should be allowed to marry has been challenged in the courts and in the hearts and minds of American society (Human Rights Campaign, 2016; Supreme Court of the United States, 2012; Wolfson, 2004). On June 26, 2015 the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) voted 5-4 in favor of marriage equality for same-sex couples. What this means is that marriage equality is the law in all 50 states and that “the United States Constitution does require states to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples” (Brydum, 2015, para. 2).

As some continue to struggle with the new law, most of the country believes that persons of homosexual orientation have, for years, shown commitment in their unions and deserve to be treated with equity in the eyes of the government (Pew Research Center, 2015, para. 14). However, the threat to overturn the SCOTUS ruling on marriage equality by some presidential candidates has once again taken root in the national discourse (Danner, 2016). Wood (2011) states, “People marry because it means something beyond a private choice, and we have good reason to concern ourselves with that broader meaning” (para. 8). Examining how individuals make meaning of the lived-experience of their relationships that are perceived as marriages, may aid in the clarification and understanding of what the underlying meaning of marriage is for some.

This dissertation is a qualitative study that used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understanding and interpreting the meaning that some heterosexual and homosexual people placed on their relationships that they viewed as marriages. The study presents the one-on-one relationship as described by participants. The researcher chose to omit questions pertaining to federal marriage benefits that may have been awarded to some of those relationships prior to the June 26, 2015 SCOTUS ruling on marriage equality, in order to shed light on the intimate developing relationship. In this way, only the organic relationship was assessed.

Mohr (1997), in his analysis of marriage, proposed that understanding the nature and meaning of marriage is essential (Baird & Rosenbaum, 2004). With a theoretical foundation based on Adult Attachment theory, Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory of Human Development (1979), and van Manen's Four Existentials (1990), this research adds to the literature by providing meaningful perspectives and a new interpretation on the lived-experience of marriage.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the research that includes a statement of the problem and reasons that explain the significance of this inquiry. It also includes the purpose and method of inquiry. Chapter 2 provides a summary of the extensive literature in the areas of adult attachment, the impact of religion on homosexuality and an explanation of environmental systems. Chapter 3 explores the methodology in detail, and Chapter 4 provides the reader with the research findings, which includes participant interviews, and the processes used to code and analyze the data. Finally, Chapter 5 provides discussion of the findings and implications for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research was to understand and interpret the lived-experiences of some heterosexual and homosexual individuals' long-term monogamous relationships that they (the participants) viewed as marriages in order to come to a general understanding of the underlying meaning that many couples appear to apply to marriage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By conducting such research, the underlying meaning of marriage for these respondents was revealed. The literature reviewed is designed to map out the relevant topics addressed in the literature that act as a foundation for this research, which are adult attachment, human development, a chronology of marriage, and an understanding of how humanity interprets *meaning* in its' relationships.

The following sections present the theoretical framework used to ground the inquiry. First, Adult Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Ainsworth, 1972), Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Bio-ecological Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1994) and van Manen's Lived-existentials (van Manen, 1990) are introduced and reviewed. These theories provide support for the following arguments: 1) attachment is a human trait and an essential component of interpersonal relationships (Ainsworth, 1972; Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Collins, 1990; Colin, 1996) marriage, as an expression of human attachment has changed throughout time (Coontz, 2005; Wolf, 2005) as human beings develop and become increasingly self-actualized (Cotgrove & Duff, 1981; Green, 2013) and 3) healthy human attachments are an integral component of human life and relationships (Ainsworth, 1972; Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Colin, 1996; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Weiss, 1987, 1991) and the expression of how we experience attachment through

our relationships such as marriage, is how we draw meaning from marriage (van Manen, 1990). The interconnectedness of these themes makes an impact on how individuals view and feel about themselves within their communities, which consequently affects interpersonal relationships, such as marriage. The second section offers a brief chronological history of marriage in order to illustrate how marriage has changed over time. This section is followed by statements on the current state of marriage, cohabitation, divorce, and the impact the most recent SCOTUS ruling made on marriage in the United States.

### **Adult Attachment Theory**

Before a child is born, gender stereotypes are influencing his or her socialization (Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990). Through parental influence, home and school activities, and different forms of media and entertainment, it is virtually impossible for a child to grow up without learning some gender biases (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009). Whether it is that all girls are feminine and wear pink or all boys are masculine and wear blue, children learn from an early age what American society expects from them through their *gender role assignment* and *cultural shaping* (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000). Gender role assignments are the ways in which culture invites us to behave depending on one's genitalia (Boundless, 2016). Cultural shaping, a term often used in business, refers to changing or influencing the behaviors of individuals that make up the organization or culture in order to conform to the ideals and values of the leadership (Senn-Delaney, 2016, p.1).

As parents, relatives, and friends pass down classic stories, like Disney's *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, or encourage current readings, such as *The Dangerous Book for*

*Boys* by Igguldan and Igguldan (2007) and *The American Girl* series by Shaefer and Bendell (1998), they are presenting the assigned gender roles that aid in the shaping of the culture (Gooden & Gooden, 2001) . In this way, the tone is set for how girls and boys are expected to behave and what society's overall expectations are of them. What is not considered by many parents, however, is the child's sexual orientation or how attempts at cultural shaping might affect his or her adjustment into the family and culture.

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Since 1975, the American Psychological Association has "called on psychologists to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations" (American Psychological Association, 2008, p. 1). It is difficult for a parent to imagine what sexual orientation his or her child might be during infancy, in part, because the moment the sex of the baby has been revealed, cultural shaping is initiated and, in part, because the child has not yet developed to the age where those sexual characteristics would start to show (American Psychological Association, 2008; Shaffer, 2009; Vygotsky, 1930).

According to the American Psychological Association (2008),

People express their sexual orientation through behaviors with others, including such simple actions as holding hands or kissing. Thus, sexual orientation is closely tied to the intimate personal relationships that meet deeply felt needs for love, attachment, and intimacy. (p. 1)

The behavioral expectation that society imposes on men and women to marry and raise a family is one way in which American society influences and shapes its citizens

(American Association of the Advancement of Science, 1990; Brake, 2012; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2012). To fulfill these expectations men and women must be able to find a suitable mate (Brake, 2012; Reilly, 2014; Wright, 2003). The idea of having the commitment of one person to raise a family and grow old with is, for many, viewed as the American dream (Center for a New American Dream, Inc., 2016). Hence, the pressure to find a mate starts at a very early age (Teenage Research Unlimited, 2006). By the time the child is an adolescent, much emphasis has been placed on dating as a bonding ritual prior to marriage (Sombat, 2000). Moreover, discussion of the child's sexual orientation, especially if it failed to meet the family and community's expectations has been discouraged (Morris, 2014).

The awareness of familial and societal rejection of gay youth has changed in recent times partially due to the increased incidence of suicide among gay youth (Carosone, 2016). The Trevor Project, whose services include providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, states that "[s]uicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among young people ages 10 to 24" and that victimization through physical and verbal abuse "increases the likelihood of self-harming behavior by 2.5 times on average" for LGBT youth (Trevor Project, 2016, p.1). The American Psychological Association (2008) states that there is "no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation" (p. 2). However, cultural shaping has an effect on how gay and lesbian children bond to their caretakers (American Psychological Association, 2016). The dynamics of how one person bonds to another during adulthood is explained in Adult Attachment Theory.

Adult attachment theory has its origins in attachment theory that was developed by John Bowlby (1969/1982) and later expanded upon by Mary Ainsworth (1972). Since then several members in the fields of psychology, counseling, and psychiatry have continued to develop this theory (Lee Raby, Cicchetti, Carlson, Egeland, & Andrew Collins, 2013; Waters, Hamilton & Weinfield, 2000; Colin, 1996; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Weiss, 1987, 1991). “Attachment theory regards the propensity to make intimate emotional bonds to particular individuals as a basic component of human nature, already present in germinal form in the neonate and continuing through adult life into old age” (Bowlby, 1988, pp. 120-121). Attachment theory maps out how adults bond to one another in relationships that they perceive as significant.

Bowlby’s (1969/1982) primary work focused on uncovering the characteristics found in bonding behaviors between infants and their parents or caregivers. These characteristics are known as the *attachment behavior system*, which Bowlby (1969/1982) classifies as *proximity maintenance, safe haven, separation distress, and secure base*. Bowlby (1988) defines attachment behavior as “any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world” (pp. 26-27). In her later elaboration of his work, Ainsworth (1972) described the characteristics as follows:

1. *Pre-attachment phase* (birth-2 months): infants are inherently interested in and responsive to social interaction with virtually everyone.
2. *Attachment-in-the-making-phase* (2-6 months): they begin to show preferences by, for example, smiling and vocalizing to and settling more quickly with some caregivers than others.

3. *Clear-cut-attachment phase* (beginning at around 6-7 months): all of the behaviors that define attachment are selectively directed toward the primary caregiver.
4. *Goal-corrected partnership* (after about 2 years): children have less urgent needs for physical proximity and are increasingly capable of negotiating with caregivers regarding separations and availability. (Hazan, Campa, & Gur-Yaish, 2006, pp. 48-49)

According to Bowlby (1988), these behaviors continue throughout adolescence and into adulthood. He refers to adult romantic relationships as “pair bonds” and suggests that this is the “prototype for attachment in adulthood” (Hazan et al., 2006, p. 49). Allan N. Schore of the Department of Psychiatry and Bio-behavioral Sciences of the University of California at the Los Angeles School of Medicine supports Bowlby’s (1988) statement that bonding is “a basic component of human nature already present in germinal form in the neonate” (p. 121). Schore (2001) states,

The right brain is centrally involved in not only processing social-emotional information, facilitating attachment functions, and regulating bodily and affective states (Schore, 1994, 1998) but also is in control of virtual functions supporting survival and enabling the organism to cope actively and passively with stress. (p. 4)

Therefore, through adult attachment theory and psychoneurobiological research, we see that attachment to an identified significant other is more than the initial sexual attraction that one may feel during the start of a romantic relationship (Bowlby, 1988; Hazan et al., 2006; Schore, 1994, 1998). In addition, according to Weiss (1976), who



studied attachment in adult relationships, specifically marital separation, the formation of adult attachment to specific figures is the individual's attachment behavior system response to the identified figure. Through his research on adult attachment, Weiss (1982) found that adult attachment differs from attachment during infancy in the following ways:

First, attachment in adults usually appears in relationships with peers...who are felt to be of unique importance; [second, adults] ...can attend to other relationships and other concerns despite threats to attachment, [and third], adult attachment is often directed toward a figure with whom a sexual relationship also exists (p. 173).

It is also important to note that Weiss (1982) and Colin (1996) view grief as a critical component to attachment. According to Colin, "If loss of the individual does not lead to grieving, then probably no attachment existed" (p. 294). Furthermore, a study conducted by both Weiss and Glick (1973) and Weiss, Glick and Parkes (1974) found that friendships could not alleviate the loneliness felt by some recently divorced individuals, even though these friendships were described as critically important to the individuals involved. According to Weiss (1982), this "implies that only certain close, face-to-face relationships function as relationships of attachment" (p. 174). The participants of this marriage study reflected the attitudes that Weiss, et.al. (1973, 1974) discuss as they described the sense of belonging and connectedness that they experienced with their spouses.

Adult attachment theory helps to frame an understanding of human growth and development, which for several years was simply unknown (Hong & Park, 2012). Through attachment theories we see that all human beings, regardless of sexual

orientation, possess an innate characteristic need to bond to other human beings whom they have identified as uniquely special (Bowlby, 1988; Hazan et al, 2006; Weiss & Glick, 1973; Weiss, Glick & Parkes, 1974; Hong & Park, 2012). As a lens for this research, adult attachment theory helps to explain this critical aspect of human behavior. In most marriages, individuals bond to another who they have identified as uniquely special (Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974; Hong & Park, 2012).

### **Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Theory of Human Development**

In order to begin to understand the lived-experience of long-term committed relationships that are viewed as marriages, it is central to the study that we explore these relationships as experienced through the various entities we encounter in daily life. Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1994) Bio-ecological Model of Human Development helps to frame these entities or *ecological systems* that affect heterosexual and homosexual couples living in relationships that individuals and couples view as marriages.

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) model of human development is

[t]he scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span, between a growing human organism [the committed couple] and the changing immediate environments in which [they] live, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded. (p. 514)

In other words, this model separates the couple's formal (work) and informal (home) settings and environments, and examines how these settings interrelate, change and affect the couple's lived-experience. This model is divided into five interrelated

systems. The first system, known as the *microsystem*, encompasses relationships closest to the couples, such as home and workplace. The second system known as the *mesosystem* is “a system of microsystems” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). For couples living in marital relationships, the mesosystem comprises the interrelations of home, children, friends, and workplace. The third system referred to as the *exosystem*, contains “other social structures, both formal and informal” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515) that affect or influence the couple’s lifeworld. Among these structures are the couple’s neighborhood; local, state, and national governments; social networks; and mass-media. The fourth system called the *macrosystem* contains “the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exo-systems are the concrete manifestations” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). The fifth and final system, the *chronosystem* identifies “change or consistency” in the characteristics of the couple engaging in a committed relationship, as well as in the environment in which the couple lives. Examples of systems affected by time would be “changes over the life course in family structure, socio-economic status, employment, place of residence, or the degree of hecticness and ability in everyday life” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40).

Bronfenbrenner (1977) states that “[w]hat place or priority [committed couples] ... have in such macrosystems is of special importance in determining how [couples] ... are treated and interact with each other in different types of settings” (p. 515).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) bio-ecological model is useful in identifying risk factors and protective factors that have an impact on heterosexual and homosexual couples living in committed relationships that they view as marriages. These risk factors and protective factors can serve to support or oppose the couple’s married life within the community.

A *risk factor* is a condition, behavior, or other factor that increases the chance of hazard or loss, while a *protective factor* increases one's protections in light of hazard or loss (Patterson & D'Augelli, 2013; Youth.gov, 2016). Prior to the latest SCOTUS ruling on marriage equality, prejudices regarding sexual orientation had an effect on the civil rights of homosexual and heterosexual couples (Doering, 2014). For example, as it stood, DOMA could be considered a protective factor for heterosexual couples because it afforded them certain federal protections and privileges under the law. However, one could also assert that DOMA was a risk factor for same-sex couples because it prevented them from enjoying the same federal protections and privileges (LGBT Organizations Fact Sheet Series, 2013). In addition, couples who were not allowed to marry because of their sexual orientation suffered the consequences of being stigmatized and marginalized by society (Johnson, 2013; Stern, 2014). Wolfson (2004) like many, viewed the risk factors as a civil rights issue for gay couples. He stated,

As gay people and as Americans, we want what all human beings deserve: both the right to be different and the right to be equal. We want our freedom to make personal choices in life, to pursue happiness. And as Americans, gay and non-gay, we must proudly make and support these aspirations as our contribution to the human rights progress of history. No American, no human being, should have to give up her or his difference in order to be treated equally under the law. (p. 174)

The latest Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality changed homosexual couples' risk factors to protective factors.

### **Van Manen's Lived-existentials: A Paradigm for Reflection**

Existentialism is a movement in philosophy that encourages humanity to search for the meaning one applies to human existence through one's lived experiences (Aho,

2014). Frankl (1959) stated that searching for meaning is “the primary motivation” in human life (p. 121). Following this thought, van Manen (1990) offered what he termed “existentials” (p. 101) as a paradigm to uncover emerging themes that arises from the descriptions that people place on their lived-experiences, which help to reveal the underlying meanings placed on the life event. The current study uses van Manen’s lived-existentials to draw out the meaning that couples place on their relationships.

As stated earlier, van Manen’s (1990) four existentials were originated by existentialist philosopher and mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). The four existentials are “*lived space* (spatiality), *lived body* (corporeality), *lived time* (temporality), and *lived human relation/other* (relationality or communality)” (p. 101). These four existentials help to create a structure that supports how committed couples make meaning of their relationships. To understand the nature of the meaning the participants apply to their experiences, “it is helpful to inquire into the nature of the lived space [body, time, and human relation] that renders that particular experience its quality of meaning” (van Manen, 1990, p. 103).

Lived space (spatiality) refers to how one feels in the space he or she is experiencing. One way to think about this would be to compare how one might feel spatially when getting into a crowded elevator as opposed to parachuting out of an airplane, or entering a neighborhood whose reputation is one of a dangerous nature. Individuals living in committed relationships, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual, have feelings about their experiences in their environments, some similar, some vastly different. How one feels about the space one inhabits affects his/her “fundamental sense of being” (van Manen, 1990, p. 102).

Lived-body (corporeality) refers to the fact that as humans, we are always “bodily in the world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 103). Rodemeyer (2006) explains Husserl’s analogy of one’s body in relation to the body of another. She states, “My own experience of my body includes a link to my consciousness, and this is essential to my living, bodily experience” (p. 4). By this, we see that all human beings experience the other through our bodies, and this is recalled through our consciousness. Corporeal experiences vary from person to person and can be given meaning through the lived-experience of the attraction that one man feels for another man, one woman feels for another woman, or how one man feels for one woman and vice versa.

Lived-time (temporality) refers to how we experience the passing of time. The following question illustrates this experience: “Why is it that weekends go by so quickly and weekdays take so long?” Temporal time is time that is experienced *subjectively*, in other words, existing in one’s mind. Past, present, and future exists in my mind and “leave[s] traces on my being” (van Manen, 1990, p. 104). In this research on marriage, couples share reflections on the passing of time in their relationships by reflecting on periods that may have strengthened or weakened their relationships.

Finally, lived-human relation/other (relationality or communality) addresses the core of what this study on marriage is about, that is, “the lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them” (van Manen, 1990, p. 104). In lived-human relations, each individual looks for a sense of purpose in life in relation to their significant other or identified attachment figure (Feeney & Thrush, 2010). In the case of this marriage research, the lived-relation of individuals who view their relationships as marriages is examined and interpreted.

All three theories presented here complement each other and work cohesively. For example, adult attachment theory serves to illuminate the bonding behaviors of individuals in relationships as they share their lived-experiences within bio-ecological systems. Consequently, the marital relationship is given meaning through themes created by van Manen's Four Existentials. These themes are then interpreted hermeneutically, thus revealing a deeper meaning of what marriage is for these participants.

### **A Chronological Overview of Marriage**

A chronological overview of marriage is presented to illustrate what marriage once was and how it has changed over the course of time. As humanity evolves, marital relationships change (Gabel, 2016; Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, 2016; The Week Staff, 2012; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Marriages during biblical times dealt with many of the same issues that modern people deal with, such as adultery, infidelity, incest, and children born out of wedlock (Coontz, 2005). The following timeline illustrates the changes in marriage over the course of centuries:

#### **Before 500 BCE:**

Polygyny, a form of polygamy in which a male (husband) has more than one female (wife), was allowed during this time in history. The book of *Genesis* in the *Bible* tells the story of Abram (Abraham) and his wife Sarai (Sarah), who could not bore him children. The story describes how Sarai gave Abram her Egyptian slave-girl, that she might bare Abram children. Sarai encourages Abram to take the slave-girl as a second wife.

*Genesis 16:3*: So after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her

husband as a wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. (The New Oxford [electronic] Annotated Bible, 2007)

King David of Israel (born, Bethlehem—died c. 962 BC, Jerusalem), who reigned from c. 1000 to c. 962 BC, “established a united kingdom over all Israel, with Jerusalem as its capital” (Rylaarsdam, 2016, para. 1). The best known record of the number of wives King David had is in *1 Chronicles* in the historical books of the *Bible*.

*1 Chronicles 3:1-9*: These are the sons of David who were born to him in Hebron: the firstborn Amnon, by Ahinoam the Jezreelite; the second Daniel, by Abigail the Carmelite; the third Absalom, son of Maacah, daughter of King Talmai of Geshur; the fourth Adonijah, son of Haggith; the fifth Shephatiah, by Abital; the sixth Ithream, by his wife Eglah; six were born to him in Hebron, where he reigned for seven years and six months. And he reigned thirty-three years in Jerusalem. These were born to him in Jerusalem: Elishama, Eliphelet, Nogah, Nepheg, Japhia, Elishama, Eliada, and Eliphelet, nine. All these were David’s sons, besides the sons of the concubines; and Tamar was their sister. (The New Oxford [electronic] Annotated Bible, 2008)

#### **Fifth Century BCE-through First Century BCE:**

- During the periods known as Ancient Greece (3300 B.C.E-31 B.C.E) and Ancient Rome (509 B.C.E-C.E. 476), husbands were afforded more rights than their wives. For example, they were allowed to turn to prostitutes, concubines, and to engage in *paiderastia*, strong emotional and sexual relationships between an older male and a boy between the ages of 14 and 20 (Crompton, 2003;



Haeberle, 1983). This is not to say that loving relationships never occurred between a husband and wife, but more so in Ancient Greece, “[the] truest love was held to exist in the association of an adult man with a much younger male” (Coontz, 2005, p. 77).

- Marriage was a contract made between the bride’s father or brother and the groom. Marriage became arranged business mergers between two families, whose main purpose was not only procreation and economic benefit but the vehicle used by the wealthy to “expand social networks and political influence” (Coontz, 2005, p. 48).

#### **Toward the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century:**

- “Roman marriage laws began to require the consent of the bride and groom.” (Yalom,, 2001, p. 28)

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Century CE through 14<sup>th</sup> Century CE:**

- St. Augustine “declared that married couples should engage in sex only to beget children, and should scrupulously avoid copulating merely for pleasure” (Yalom, 2001, p. 15).
- “Canon law made two changes that were to have long-term effects. First, the church pressured individuals to marry in the presence not only of witnesses, but also of a priest, and to perform this ceremony ‘at church.’ Second, it downplayed the need for parental consent, and foregrounded the mutual will of the intended spouses as the major criterion in the making of a valid marriage. This revolutionary doctrine would endure and flourish over the centuries.” (Yalom, 2001, p.46)

### **15<sup>th</sup> Century CE through 18<sup>th</sup> Century CE:**

- By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the tide had turned and the focus was placed on the nuclear family along with the married couple's right to privacy. With that came changes in many of the rituals and rules surrounding marriage. Catholic and Protestant religious leaders "narrowed their criteria for a valid marriage" (Coontz, 2005, p. 137).
- Age restrictions and consent to be married became enforced by religious and legal leaders. Catholic and other authorities specifically enforced the penalization of women for engaging in sex outside of marriage, and unmarried women were viewed as an economic and moral burden, public rituals in support of or in opposition to a marriage were discouraged, and the state was encouraged to legally define marriage. Between the mid-18<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the inner workings and social functions of marriage were reconstructed. Who one married determined one's political rights, gender roles, education, employment, responsibilities, and access to property. Many anthropologists, sociologists, and historians (Becker, 1985; Becker & Murphy, 1992; Durkheim, 1984; Nash & Fernandez-Kelly, 1983) believed that this created the division of labor between the sexes—some of which still exists today.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Century CE:**

- 1801: "Murray Hall, a prominent Tammany Hall politician in New York, was posthumously discovered to have been a woman. Hall dressed in men's clothing, lived as a man and was married twice, both times to women." (Lambda Archives, 2016, para 23)

- 1840: England. “Queen Victoria starts a trend by wearing virginal white, instead of the traditional jeweled wedding gown (Psychology Today, 2008, para. 10).
- “Under the Divorce Act of 1857, a man could obtain the dissolution of a marriage if he could prove one act of infidelity on the part of his wife; but a woman had to prove that her husband had been guilty of both infidelity and cruelty.” (Lambda Archives, 2016, para. 27)

## **20<sup>th</sup> Century CE:**

- 1950s: “marriage became almost universal in the U.S. Four out of five people surveyed in 1957 believed that preferring to remain single was ‘sick’, ‘neurotic’ or ‘immoral’” (Lambda Archives, 2016, para. 34).
- 1967: “In *Loving v. Virginia* the United States Supreme Court declared Virginia’s anti-miscegenation statute unconstitutional, thereby ending all race-based legal restrictions on marriage in the United States. The court’s decision was based on the due process and the equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment” (Lambda Archives, 2016, para. 35).
- 1970s U.S.: The Women’s movement creates self-sufficient women and social rules change. Marriage is no longer obligatory. Divorce skyrockets. (Psychology Today, 2008)
- 1991 U.S.: *Baehr v. Miike* (originally *Baehr v. Lewin*)- lawsuit initiated by three same-sex couples in Hawaii, who argued that prohibiting same-sex couples to marry violated the state’s constitution.
- 1996 U.S.: President Clinton signs the Defense of Marriage Act into law.

- 1998 U.S.: Hawaii Constitutional Amendment 2 passed. It is the first constitutional amendment to target same-sex partnerships.
- 1999 U.S.: Baehr v. Miike case is dismissed.
- 2000 U.S.: Vermont legalizes civil unions for same-sex couples.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century CE:**

- 2004-2007 U.S.: Constitutional amendments denying same-sex marriage in 18 states are approved.
- 2008 U.S.: “California Supreme Court strikes down a state law banning same-sex marriage, and gay couples begin marrying a month later.” (Wolf, 2015, p.1)
  - “California voters approve Proposition 8, which bans gays and lesbians from marrying.” (Wolf, 2015, p.1)
- 2009 U.S.: Iowa, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, and the District of Columbia all legalize same-sex marriage. However, Maine voters “overturn the state’s gay marriage law at the ballot box.” (Wolf, 2015, p.1)
- 2010 U.S.: “U.S. District Court Judge Joseph Tauro in Massachusetts becomes the first to rule that a key section of the Defense of Marriage Act is unconstitutional.” (Wolf, 2015, p.1)
- 2011 U.S.: New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo signs law legalizing same-sex marriage. (Wolf, 2015, p.1)
- 2012 U.S.: California’s Proposition 8 declared unconstitutional in federal appeals court.
  - New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie vetoes approved same-sex marriage bill.

- “President Obama becomes first sitting president to announce his support for same-sex marriage.” (Wolf, 2015)
- 2013 U.S.: “Supreme Court hears arguments in *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, the challenge to the Proposition 8 ruling, and *United States v. Windsor*, the challenge to DOMA.” (Wolf, 2015)
  - Rhode Island, Delaware, Minnesota governors sign same-sex marriage law.
- 2014 U.S.: U.S. District Courts across the nation strike down gay marriage bans. Most states appeal.
- 2015 U.S.: The Supreme Court of the United States legalizes same-sex marriage across the United States in a landmark 5-4 ruling.

### **The Current State of Marriage in the US**

There was a decline in the marriage rate at the beginning of the century (2000-2010). The marriage rate dropped from 8.2% of the total population to 6.8%, ending in 2010 with no change in percentage from the previous year (CDC/NCHS National Vital Statistics System, 2012). A 2002 report prepared by the Centers for Disease Control’s (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics, found that “[b]y age 30, three-quarters of women in the U.S. have been married and about half have cohabitated outside of marriage” (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002, p. 1). This data, compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics, the U.S. Census, and the American Community Survey, reported that “[t]he 2011 preliminary number of US births was 3,953,593, 1 percent less (or 45,793 fewer) births than in 2010; the general fertility rate (63.2 per 1,000 women age

15-44 years) declined to the lowest rate ever reported for the United States” (U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, 2012, abstract).

Some researchers see the economy as one of the causes in the decline in marriage (Wang & Parker, 2014), “partly because they [millennials] don’t have jobs and partly because marriage is becoming less highly regarded” (Luscombe, 2014, para. 1). Other reasons for the decline in marriage stem from census data that indicates that “[fewer] young people are getting married and many are getting married later” (Luscombe, 2014, para 2). According to a PEW Research Center (2014) study, “The three main reasons people give for their singleness are that they haven’t found the right person (27%), aren’t financially stable enough (30%) and are not ready to settle down (22%)” (Luscombe, 2014, para 4). Still, authors who have conducted research for government publications and academics (Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010; Rogers & Thornton, 1985; Smock, 2000) see the trend in marriage slipping away to the popularity of cohabitation. Recently, an article by *Time* magazine reporter, Belinda Luscombe (2010), reported that the 50% divorce figure that is often reported in the media is “a murky statistic” (para. 2) because “not all states collect data, and the numbers change dramatically depending on the methods and sources that are used” (para 2).

### **Cohabitation**

The definition and discussion of cohabitation is presented here in order to illuminate the significance that the word *marriage* brings to certain relationships, which is not the case for cohabitation. In most instances, when talking about cohabitation one is referring to “living together ...for an extended period of time as if the parties were married” (the freedictionary.com, 2016) but without the legal constraints and federal

benefits of a legal marriage. It is important to note that according to *The Law Dictionary*, (2016) the word cohabitation means simply “living together”. Therefore, cohabitation may also refer to two or more people who are living together in non-romantic or non-committed relationships. Cohabitation therefore, can appear in several different living situations. For example, two female, two male, mixed (female and male) couples, a single parent and child, or even a head of household and relative can cohabit.

Modern 1970s pop-culture reflected and poked fun at some of these living situations through televised situation comedies, like *The Odd Couple* (Marshall & Paris, 1970-1975) and *Three’s Company* (Ross, West, & Powers, 1977-1984). Based on the Broadway play, *The Odd Couple* (Simon & Nichols, 1965), which ran from 1970 to 1975, was the story of two men, Felix Unger (Tony Randall) and Oscar Madison (Jack Klugman) who lived together after separating from their wives, despite their very different living styles. *Three’s Company*, which followed *The Odd Couple’s* tenure, ran from 1976 until 1984. *Three’s Company* was the story of two women in their 20s, Janet (Joyce DeWitt) and Chrissy (Suzanne Somers) and one man, Jack (John Ritter), also in his 20s, living in an apartment together (Mann, 1998). These shows, like many others that commented on societal issues, made subtle commentary through innuendo about dating, marriage, and homosexuality within these cohabiting relationships and played a part in influencing society’s opinions and beliefs about such relationships (Mann, 1998; Gale, 2007).

Over the years, cohabitation studies have grown “from small-scale studies ...to nationally representative surveys” (Casper, Cohen, & Simmons, 1999, p. 3). These studies are presented as one possible reason for the decrease in marriage rates over the

past few years. Demographic researchers have shown rapid increases in cohabitation since the 1970s (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012; Glick & Spanier, 1980; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Kreider, 2010; Smock, 2000). Glick and Spanier (1980) used data from the 1975 Current Population Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau to compare and contrast the characteristics of heterosexual married couples with formerly married individuals living with an unrelated adult of the opposite sex; and never-married individuals living with an unrelated adult of the opposite sex.

Glick and Spanier (1980) showed consistent demographic characteristics of non-marital heterosexual cohabiting couples to be young, more prone to liberal views, less religious, and supportive of nontraditional family roles and egalitarian gender roles. They found that changes in the social structure that included delay in first marriage by both sexes, access to a sexual partner or increased sexual freedom, greater social acceptance, and decreased social pressure to marry at younger ages (female: 18-24; male: 20-26) all influenced an individual's decision to choose cohabitation over marriage. These changes in social structure were found to be determining factors that contributed to the increase in the cohabiting activities of heterosexual individuals.

It is important to note that greater social acceptance of cohabitation was granted to cohabiting individuals as long as these individuals did not procreate (Glick & Spanier, 1980, p. 21). What had occurred, however, was an increase in children born out of wedlock and into what many believe were unstable cohabiting families (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1995). Smock (2000) reported that the impact on marriage from the mid-1960s through to the 1990s was significant. According to Smock (2000) there was a steady rise of individuals who participated in cohabitation



prior to marriage. Cohabitation, Smock (2000) stated, "...is a rather short-lived experience with most ending it either by terminating the relationship or by marrying within a few years" (p. 3).

In a more recent report that focused on the number of unmarried opposite-sex couples living in the U.S. between the years 2009 and 2010, Kreider (2010) found a "13 percent increase (868,000) in the number of people who [had] chosen cohabitation over marriage. In 2009, there were an estimated 6.7 million unmarried couples living together, while in 2010, there were 7.5 million" (p. 1). With this steady increase in cohabiting couples and scores of children being born to unmarried couples (Kreider, 2010; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1995), the logical question that comes to mind is, what role does cohabitation play in the American family system? According to Smock (2000), "Cohabitation is either a stage in the marriage process...or a substitute for marriage" (p. 7). Research shows that for many cohabiters, who intend on marrying one day, cohabitation is simply a step, likened to engagement (Smock, 2000, p.7). However, "[t]he second view—that cohabitation is an alternative to marriage—implies that marriage as an institution is threatened and losing its centrality in the United States" ( Smock, 2000, p. 8).

A 2012 report on first marriages conducted by Copen et al. (2006-2010) illustrates how current trends in cohabitation remain consistent with past findings. A national survey of 12, 279 women and 10,403 men aged 15 to 44 in the household population of the United States were sampled between the years 2006 and 2010 with an overall response rate of 77%. Copen et al. (2012) findings revealed:

- The percentage of women currently cohabiting with a man in a sexual relationship rose from 3.0% in 1982, to 11% from 2006 to 2010
- Both men and women first married at older ages (median age for women 25.8; men 28.3)
- Educational background was significant in determining first marriage for both men and women. “One in five (20%) women without a high school diploma or GED were currently cohabiting, while 1 in 14 women (6.8%) with a bachelor’s degree were currently cohabiting”(p. 5).
- There was a higher probability for first marriages for women and men who reported growing up with a religious affiliation (women-51%; men-84%), as compared to those with no religious affiliation (women-37%; men-62%) (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012)

Cohabitation for most American couples appears to be “a stage in the marriage process” (Smock, 2000, p.7) if marriage is the ultimate goal. Cohabitation, therefore does not appear to possess the special underlying meaning that couples seek through marriage.

### **Divorce**

It is important to note that the statistics reported here are reflective of heterosexual married couples prior to the June 26, 2015 Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality. According to the United Nations Demographics and Social Statistics Division, which is “ the main international organization which collects, compiles, and disseminates official national statistics on marriage, divorce and marital status” (United Nations, 2004-2007) the United States is actually the “tenth highest on the list of countries with the highest divorce rates” (records.com, 2015). However, the American

Community Survey Report (2015) states that “divorce rates are higher in the United States compared with European nations” (para. 1). Claire Cain Miller (2014), *New York Times* columnist reports that an optimistic trend has recently been uncovered regarding divorce rates in the United States over the last 20 years. Cain Miller (2014) states that the divorce rate has dropped due to “later marriages, birth control, and the rise of so-called love marriages” (Cain Miller, 2014, p.1). Marriage therapist, William Doherty (2015) also sees ‘women’s expectations’ (para. 8) as a pertinent factor. Doherty (2015) states that “two-thirds of divorces are initiated by women” (para. 8).

The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) is a survey that gathers marital histories of men and women in the United States in addition to “pregnancy, infertility, use of contraception, and men’s and women’s health”(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016, para. 1). The NSFG is “jointly planned and funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) and several other programs of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services” (Copen et al., 2012, p. 1). Current divorce estimates found in the NSFG (2012) show that “about half of first marriages [in the United States] end in divorce” (Copen, et al., 2012, p.1).

As previously discussed, research indicates that heterosexual couples who cohabit prior to marriage are more likely to divorce than those who do not (Copen, et al., 2012). Although recent research shows a decline in this association, cohabiters’ attitudes toward marriage continue to have strong influences on divorce. According to Copen et al. (2012), “Fifty-five percent of women and 54% of men were engaged or had definite plans to marry their first spouse when the cohabitation began” (p. 8). With the

current change in marriage equality, and as more and more homosexual couples marry, trends in marriage, divorce and cohabitation will likely change. The trends in marriage, divorce and cohabitation will also be noted in other indicators of marriage stability such as race, mental health, and socioeconomic status.

### **Race, Mental Health, and Marital Stability**

The 2006-2010 NSFG revealed notable economic and racial differences in the probability of first marriage for women age 35. “Black women had the highest percentage never married (55%) followed by U.S-born Hispanic women (49%)” (Copen et al., 2012, p. 5). Black women (37%) had the lowest chances of first marriages lasting 20 years, significantly lower than for White women (54%) (Copen et al., 2012, p. 5). It was also noted that White men and women transition faster from separation to divorce than their Hispanic and Black counterparts (Copen et al., 2012). The transition from separation to divorce is in part due to educational and socioeconomic factors. Copen et al. (2012) findings leads one to consider the possible risk factors and protective factors that may have an impact on people of differing cultural backgrounds.

Studies have consistently documented lower levels of well-being linked to the stress of divorce or never having been married (Brown & Jones, 2012; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2007; Harris, Lee, & DeLeone, 2010; Witters & Sharpe, 2014). This is reflected in greater levels of depression, alcohol and drug use, less satisfying sex lives, increased health problems, and lower levels of self-esteem that lead to lower levels of happiness and increased isolation (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Overwhelming documentation (Bridges & Crutchfield, 1988; Mauer & King, 2007; NAACP, 2016; Pettit & Western, 2004; Tonry, 1994) also reveals a

disproportionately higher rate of incarceration for racial minorities, particularly Black and Hispanic males, in the United States. “In 2005, 8.1 percent of all black males age 25 to 29 were in prison, compared to 2.6 percent of Hispanic males and 1.1 percent of white males” (Garland, Sophn, & Wodahl, 2008, p. 4). Today, African Americans “constitute nearly 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated population... [And] are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites” (NAACP, 2009-2015, p. 1).

According to Garland et al. (2008),

When inmates are released, they may be confronted with a number of mental and emotional challenges, including post-release disorientation, difficulty adjusting to change, fear of failure, anxiety, and mistrust of and withdrawal from other people.... Adding to these psychological impediments, prisoners usually go home with little money... and dim employment prospects.... Many of the employment opportunities that do exist for convicted felons lie in unskilled jobs with low wages and abysmal-to-nonexistent benefit packages.... Relationships with family, which can facilitate social readjustment..., may be strained or dissolved due to the offender’ s absence (pp. 7-8).

The disproportionate number of incarcerated men, particularly in the African American and Latino cultures has contributed to this populations’ low economic status and is seen, by some, to be in direct correlation with the decrease in marriage rates in the United States (Lopoo & Western, 2005; Techman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000).

Upon release from incarceration, many men are undesirable employment prospects (Garland et al., 2008). Minority women, whose spouses are incarcerated have to assume responsibility for employment and livelihood, in addition to the original responsibilities associated with child rearing (Garland et al., 2008, p. 11). These situations have forced

more minority women to settle for cohabitation in order to secure seemingly stable homes for themselves and their children (Garland et al., 2008).

### **The Impact of Same-sex Marriage on Marriage in the U.S.**

The first year anniversary of the legalization of marriage for same-sex couples is June 26, 2016. For several years prior to this landmark decision, speculation had been made about the impact that legalizing same-sex marriage would have on American society (Mason Kiefer, 2003; Beaucar Vlahos, 2004; Foust, 2004; Phelps, 2016). A Gallup poll (2003) revealed “a relatively widespread perception that it [same-sex marriage] would not be good for society” (Mason Kiefer, 2003). Although anti-gay advocates believe that the legalization of marriage for same-sex partnerships is detrimental to society (Foust, 2004; Mantyla, 2015; Preston, 2015), a 2004 Fox News report stated that “analysts are torn over the impact that legalized gay marriage will have on the way Americans view the institution and the way they look at homosexuality” (Beaucar Vlahos, 2004).

According to Nate Phelps (2016), co-founder of the Alberta Secular Conference and an LGBT advocate, the “real impact of gay marriage in America [will be] when the long road of healing begins” (Phelps, 2016, para. 6). Phelps (2016) is referring to what he states as “society [shifting] in their mentality” (para. 6) as a process of the healing that will take place. To that end, a more recent Gallup poll (January 6-10, 2016) shows that Americans’ satisfaction with acceptance of gays and lesbians is at 60%, which is “up from 53% in 2015” (McCarthy, 2016).

## Summary

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the theoretical framework established for this inquiry. Adult Attachment Theory, a theory that evolved from John Bowlby's (1969/1982) and Mary Ainsworth's (1972) attachment theory is the first part of this theoretical framework. It provides support for the notion that attachment is an innate human characteristic that is experienced by all people regardless of sexual orientation (Bowlby, 1969/1982, Ainsworth, 1972). It also provides evidence to support the premise that the quality of adult attachment is determined by the early interactions of caretaker and infant (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth, 1972).

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1994) Bioecological Theory of Human Development is the second part of the theoretical framework. Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1994) model serves as a template for the participants in this study to share their lived experiences as individuals living in committed relationships that they view as marriages, while interacting in bioecological systems. Finally, van Manen's (1990) Lived Existentials forms the third part of this framework and is used to help interpret and then illuminate the underlying meaning that couples place on their lived experiences of marriage.

A brief chronology of marriage is provided to inform the reader of its transformation over centuries. The influence that marriage has had on society since its inception has shaped how societies function (Coontz, 2005) over time. An overview of the current rates of marriage, cohabitation, and divorce in the United States is also provided, as well as the impact that legalized marriage for same-sex couples has made since the Supreme Court ruled in favor of marriage equality for gay people.

### CHAPTER 3

#### METHODOLOGY

Every research project has a method or *way of knowing* that best suits what the researcher is trying to uncover (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). According to Rudestam and Newton (2001), “The key to evaluating a completed study is whether or not the selected method is sufficiently rigorous and appropriate to the research question” (p. 26). The goal of this study was to interpret the lived-experiences of heterosexual and homosexual individuals, who had been or were currently living in committed relationships that they viewed as marriages, in order to discover what the underlying meaning of marriage was for these participants. To determine the best methodology to use for this study, quantitative and qualitative methods were compared.

Quantitative methodology requires that the knowledge being sought, in this case, a deeper insight into the marriage relationship, be derived from *natural science*, which are “sciences used in the study of the physical world” (Natural science, 2002, p. 550). Natural science is a branch of science that involves “detached observation, controlled experiment, and mathematical or quantitative measurement” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). According to van Manen (1990), natural science studies “objects of nature... and the way that objects behave” (p. 3). Using quantitative methodology to conduct a study on marriage could not provide the answers to the types of questions being asked in this study.

Qualitative methodology uses *human science*, a method of inquiry that uses human subjects. Human science is “a branch of study which deals with people or their actions” (Human science, 2015). Because my interest lies in the answers provided by



married people or people who had been married, the questions being asked are best answered using qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology “emphasizes the importance of context in helping us understand a phenomenon of interest” (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008, p. 257). Good qualitative research or inquiry “requires an *immersion* in some aspect of social life, in an attempt to capture the wholeness of that experience, followed by an attempt to convey this understanding to others” (McLeod, 2001, Preface). In order to uncover the underlying meaning that these participants placed on their marital relationships, I immersed myself in discourse related to their marriages. Therefore, qualitative methodology was the logical course to take to ensure that this study was “conceptually and theoretically grounded” (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, pp. 26-27).

### **Guiding Theoretical Context**

Constructivist learning theory believes that learning requires active involvement during the learning process rather than receiving information passively and trying to retain it (Hein, 1991). Constructivism “refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves---each learner individually (and socially) constructs meaning---as he or she learns” (Hein, 1991). Constructivism does not seek to determine the truth, yet recognizes that ideas about the world, specifically, the social world where people may experience marriage, “are constructed in the minds of individuals” (Heppner et al., 2008, p. 12). This qualitative study uses a constructivist approach to understanding the phenomenon of marriage by interviewing participants about their experiences of married life and interpreting their responses hermeneutically. Each individual, regardless of the system in which he or she lives or works, brings his or her own reality to an experience, even if the experience is shared by many (Ferlic, 2007).

For example, the horrific events that took place in the United States on September 11, 2001 were experienced indirectly by millions of people all over the world and directly by thousands living in New York, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania. If the thousands of people in these two states and the District of Columbia were interviewed about what they had experienced on that fateful day, the dialogue would be rich with each individual attributing what they found to be meaningful about the events that had occurred. It is the descriptions and the feelings expressed by individuals about an event or an experience that helps society draw meaning and knowledge to it (Boud, Keough, & Walker, 2013). Similarly, the descriptions of married life and the feelings expressed by the participants in this study draw meaning and knowledge about marriage. The meaning and knowledge are “important in determining social relations and behavior” (Heppner et al., 2008, p. 12). The meaning placed on behaviors experienced in marriage, such as the ways in which we attach to one another, express intimacy, and express vulnerability at different times during the relationship as well as the expression of feeling safe within the marriage is examined here through what is known as *critical theory* by philosophers and social scientists (Bohman, 2015).

Critical theory focuses on cultural, political, historical, and economic forces as social constructions that are believed to be truths, as they relate to groups in society who have and do not have power (Chen, 2016; Heppner et al., 2008, p. 12). Paradigms are “the complete set of beliefs and resultant practices that define a working group of scientists” (Shank, 2006, p. 216). The current study is supported by the following paradigm or branches of study: “*ontology* [italics added] (the nature of reality),

*epistemology* [italics added] (the relationship between the inquirer and the known), and *methodologies* [italics added] (the methods of gaining knowledge of the world)”

(Heppner et al., 2008, p. 7). The underlying meaning of marriage for these participants is illuminated through the following procedures:

- Participants’ sharing of their lived experience of marriage with a focus on the meaning they place on it (Ontology)
- Engagement in individual interviews as an “inextricably intertwined relationship between researcher and participants in order to gather data (Epistemology)” (Heppner et al., 2008, p. 7).
- A phenomenological description and hermeneutic interpretation of the reported data (Methodology).

By taking a constructivist viewpoint, this research is not seeking to determine whether a participant’s experience of marriage is real or true or false; rather, it seeks to reveal how individuals of heterosexual and homosexual orientations experience and make meaning of their marital relationships.

### **Phenomenological Hermeneutic Inquiry**

This research is a study in human science. The purpose of human science is to develop an understanding of the meaning placed on a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). The word phenomenon originated in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century (1595–1605) and takes its root in Latin (phaenomenon) and Greek origin (phainómenon), and means “appearance, to appear, or to show” (Phenomenon, 2015). The school of philosophical thought known as *phenomenology* was founded by German philosopher and mathematician, Edmund

Husserl (1859-1938), who is often referred to as the “father of phenomenology” (Rodemeyer, 2006, p. 1).

According to Husserl (1907), phenomenology “is an analysis of essences and an investigation of the general states of affairs which are to be built up in immediate intuition (Alston & Nakhtnikian, 1964, p.46). Simply put, “[p]henomenology describes how one orients to lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). “Husserl argues that the relation between perception and its objects is not passive. Rather, human consciousness actively constitutes objects of experience” (Holstein & Gubrim, 2005, pp. 484-485). Therefore, phenomenology aims to examine “the lifeworld—the world as we immediately experience it” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). This human experience of the world is “pre-reflective” and “pre-theoretical” (van Manen, p. 9) in that it does not classify, categorize, or conceptualize experiences. That is to say, phenomenology aims to obtain a deeper comprehension of the meaning human beings place on everyday experiences pre-reflectively (van Manen, 1990). This research uses phenomenology to reveal the deeper meaning that some heterosexual and homosexual people place on their marriages.

Van Manen (1990) explains that phenomenological reflection is retrospective because, in order to reflect upon a lived experience, the experience must have occurred; hence, it is not introspective. It is through recollections or existential structures of the lived experience that the essence of the phenomenon is revealed (van Manen, 1990). But why do this? What is the purpose in trying to understand the deeper meaning that lives beneath the surface of marriage or any other phenomenon?

According to van Manen (1990), “Human life needs knowledge, reflection, and thought to make itself knowable to itself, including its complex and ultimately mysterious nature” (p. 17). When thought, knowledge, and reflection occur the possibility exists that the marginalized and oppressed members of society gain a certain freedom and that those who would choose to oppress them gain “a deeper understanding of the meaning of certain human experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 21). It is knowledge, thought, and self-reflection that move humanity forward (Leary & Buttermore, 2003).

To further illustrate this point, on September 3, 2015, Kim Davis, a county clerk in Rowan County, Kentucky went to jail for refusing to issue marriage licenses to gay couples (Beam & Galofaro, 2015). Davis was jailed by U.S. District Judge David Bunning, “for contempt [of court] after she insisted that ‘her conscience [would] not allow’ her to follow federal court rulings on gay marriage” (Beam & Galofaro, 2015, para. 2). Gay people living in Rowan County, Kentucky who were seeking societal equality for their intimate relationships were marginalized by Davis’ actions (Blinder & Pérez-Peña, 2015). The current research was conducted to yield the much needed insight about marriage that is reflected by individuals regardless of their sexual orientations, in order to provide such understanding.

Hermeneutics is the approach in which phenomenological data are interpreted and analyzed (Kinsella, 2006). Hermeneutics “stresses how prior understandings and prejudices shape the interpretive process” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 27). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) further states that semiotics, “the science of signs or sign systems” (p.

36) is the written or linguistic approach applied to phenomenology and hermeneutics. The data that were collected for this research were interpreted hermeneutically.

Hermeneutic phenomenological research, therefore, explains the deepest meaning of the lived experience (Kinsella, 2006). It searches for ways in which men, women, and children experience the world. Its aim is “the fulfillment of our human nature: to become fully who we are” (van Manen, 1990, p. 12). Hermeneutic interpretation of lived experience seeks to reveal what the phenomenon “already points to” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 68) as it provokes deeper thought and creates a new awareness in thinking.

Unlike other types of methodology (content analysis, for example), the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology (and phenomenology) does not possess a meaning of its subject matter; in contrast, it aims to unveil what the subject means (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology does not utilize specific investigative procedures as would be found in say, a quantitative study (van Manen, 1990). Instead, it relies on the scholarship of the researcher and the “broad field of phenomenological scholarship” (van Manen, 1990, p. 30) to serve as a guide for the researcher.

Hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry was used to interpret the responses of the participants in this study. The phenomenological scholarship is found in themes that Van Manen (1990) referred to as *existentials* or something that is grounded in existence (Merriam-Webster.com, 2016). Van Manen’s (1990) Four Existentials are *spatiality* (lived-space), *corporeality* (lived-body), *temporality* (lived-time), and *relationality* (lived-human relation).

### **Van Manen's Four Lived Existentials**

Van Manen's (1990) four existentials act as guides to uncovering what is meaningful about marriage for the participants of this study and are one of the three components that act as the theoretical foundation for this inquiry. The first existential, lived-space refers to the space we feel, whether it is in terms of mathematics as in dimension, height, or length, or the feeling that generates after we experience an event that leaves us feeling happy (happy space) or angry (bad space) (Rich, Graham, Tacket, & Shelley, 2013; van Manen, 1990). These are all examples of spaces that are lived in. "In general, we may say that we become the space we are in" (van Manen, 1990, p. 102). As we experience space, our bodies tell limiting information about our "selves," which in turn creates a space for either dialogue to occur or not. This experience is referred to as lived-body (Rich, Graham, Tacket, & Shelley, 2013; van Manen, 1990).

Lived-time refers to how we experience the time that passes when one is either bored with or engrossed in an activity Rich, et al., 2013; van Manen, 1990). In this way, lived time is subjective, as opposed to the time we see on the face of a clock, which is objective (Kelly, 2016). Both, however, reflect how we live in the world (Rich, et al., 2013; van Manen, 1990). Finally, lived-relation refers to the relationships we maintain with others that allows us to "transcend our *selves*" (van Manen, 1990, p. 105). Phenomenologically speaking, these four existentials act as guides for the researcher and are viewed as "belonging to the fundamental structure of the lifeworld" (van Manen, 1990, p. 102).

Each existential is interconnected and aids the researcher in bringing to the surface the underlying meanings of the lived-experiences of individuals who view their

committed relationships as marriages. Participants of this study shared their experiences of marriage by expressing themselves through statements such as: “I got the flutters...”, “I lost myself in my marriage”, and “I feel very comfortable in my marriage now”. By analyzing their statements and interpretations of their lived experiences of marriage hermeneutically, certain themes emerged. The themes emerged by writing the text in a way that embodies the participants’ lived-experiences. Van Manen (1990) offered the use and pragmatic application of anecdotal writing when writing human science research. He stated, “Anecdote can be understood as a methodological device in human science to make comprehensible some notion that easily eludes us” (van Manen, 1990, p. 116). Van Manen (1990) viewed anecdotes as “poetic narrative which describes a universal truth” (p. 119). Therefore, the way in which lived-experience is transformed into the written word is the method that is used (van Manen, 1990).

The four existentials presented here are influenced by the bonds we make throughout the lifespan. How one attaches to their parent(s)/caretaker(s) during infancy determines the quality of one’s relationships through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and into old age (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth, 1972; Colin, 1996; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Weiss, 1982, Weiss, 1991). This is explained in the following section on Adult Attachment theory.

### **Adult Attachment Theory**

Adult attachment theory is a continuation of Bowlby (1969/1982) and Ainsworth’s (1972) attachment theory. Attachment theory is “an evolutionary-ethological approach” (Ainsworth et al., 1978) and “a model of social and personality development” (Collins & Read, 1990, p. 644). Adult Attachment theory asserts that the



early bonds formed between infant and caregiver determine the nature and quality of future relationships that continue throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Ainsworth, 1972; Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Colin, 1996; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Weiss, 1982, Weiss, 1991).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) used attachment theory as a blueprint for understanding adult romantic relationships from which they calculated dimensions of attachment. Collins and Read (1990) conducted three studies that examined associations found in adult attachment. They developed a multi-item scale to ascertain Hazan and Shaver's (1987) calculation of dimensions. Collins and Read's (1990) scale forms the foundation of the theory for adult attachment styles. The styles are categorized as: 1) *Secure*—the ability to attain a feeling of security and ease of comfort when depending on others or having others depend on you without worry of being abandoned, 2) *Avoidant*—experiencing uncomfortable, nervous feelings and difficulty with trust when being close to others, and 3) *Anxious/Ambivalent*—experiencing feelings of worry that one's partner does not truly love you, thereby making others reluctant to get close to you (Collins & Read, 1990, p. 646).

Collins and Read (1990) examined in great detail, “the relations between adult attachment and beliefs about the self, the nature of romantic love, and the social world in general” (p. 644). Respondents in their study completed several scales that assessed different aspects of self-esteem:

Two measures of self-esteem were included: The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale..., which focuses on general self-acceptance, and the Texas Social Behavior Inventory ...which measures the extent to which a person feels self-assured in

social situations. Next, subjects completed the Personal Attributes Questionnaire ...which contains two subscales of interest: Instrumentality and Expressiveness. The Instrumentality scale measures agency and self-assuredness, and the Expressiveness scale measures interpersonally oriented characteristics such as being kind and aware of others. (Collins & Read, 1990, p. 651)

Results from the Collins and Read (1990) study found that respondents who possessed more secure attachment styles had “greater feelings of self-worth and social self-confidence” (Collins & Read, 1990, p. 652), while those who had less secure, dependent, and anxiety ridden attachment styles had a lower view of themselves (Collins & Read, 1990). Their study exemplifies how early attachments influence self-esteem and plays a significant role in how individuals and couples attach to one another in their romantic relationships while they navigate the bio-ecological systems in which they live.

### **Bronfenbrenner: Creating Change across Ecological Systems**

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) creation of a bio-ecological theory of human development has provided an intimate understanding of “the importance of the dynamic and multitiered ecology of human development” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. xiii). Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory is presented as an essential focal point as we go further into understanding and revealing the meaning that some individuals who perceive their relationships as marriages place on their relationships.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) vision of human development unfolds through a system of five ecological levels or systems that are classified as: 1) the *microsystem*—the immediate setting in which the individual or couple is behaving at any given moment; 2) the *mesosystem*—“the interrelations among major settings containing the

developing person at a particular point in his or her life” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515); 3) the *exosystem*, which does not directly involve the developing person but influences the developing person’s behavior (e.g., a child’s school that is located in a distant community) (Bronfenbrenner, 2005); 4) the *macrosystem*—the system “involving culture, macro-institutions (such as the federal government) and public policy” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. xiii), and 5), the *chronosystem*, which encompasses change over time for the individual and the environment where he or she lives (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), the relationship between the individual and the ecological systems that he or she inhabits “constitutes the driving force of human development” (p. xix). Focus is placed on the participants’ lived-experiences as they relate to their ecological systems. Focusing on the participants’ lived-experiences as they relate to their ecological systems creates a platform to learn and gather information about how ecological systems may have an impact on the participants’ marital relationships.

### **Research Design**

The design of a research project refers to the framework, blueprint, or step-by-step approach formulated by the researcher that is devised by the chosen method used to help the researcher explore specific research questions (Heppner, Wampold & Kivlighan, 2008). A hermeneutic approach was used to interpret the life experiences of the participants’ marital relationships. As phenomenological research, the study’s aim is to uncover the deeper meaning of marriage for the participants of this study. This hermeneutic phenomenological approach consisted of the following thought-out steps

used to access a deeper level of insight about the marriage relationship for these participants. Approximately 17 open-ended questions were created to inquire about their experiences and feelings about their marital relationship(s). Once the interviews of this semi-structured interview process were conducted and recorded, I transcribed the interviews and analyzed the data by identifying themes and creating a structural explanation of the findings. The following subsections will provide further explanation into this process.

### **Sample**

Purposive sampling, also known as selective, subjective or judgmental sampling, is a type of sampling that relies on the discernment of the researcher (Lund Research Ltd., 2012). Sample size in purposive sampling is usually quite small because the main goal in this type of sampling is “to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which will best enable [the researcher] to answer [the] research questions” (Lund Research Ltd., 2012, para. 3).

Homogeneous sampling is a purposive sampling technique aimed at gathering a sample of units that share the same characteristics or traits (Lund Research Ltd., 2012, para. 2). This study used purposive homogenous sampling to recruit couples and individuals across the United States who were presently or had been formerly engaged in a committed relationship with one person thought of as a spouse, and who had perceived their relationship to be a marriage. Participation was limited to homosexual and heterosexual individuals in order to identify if there were any differences in the lived-experiences of marriage for persons of these two types of sexual orientation. Participants self-identified as either heterosexual or homosexual.

Given the vast number of persons presumed to be living in marital relationships in the US, homogenous sampling was the logical design to use for this study, as it allowed me the capacity to narrow the search requirements in the most beneficial way. By implementing homogeneous sampling, I was able to reach persons across the United States who met the requirements of the study and were willing to share their innermost feelings about their relationships. In addition, the research question that is being addressed (*How do homosexual and heterosexual people in committed relationships that they perceive as marriages make meaning of their marriages?*) is specific to the characteristics of heterosexual and homosexual individuals and couples. Therefore, a small number of respondents (12) was sufficient to maintain as close an association as possible with the respondents, while becoming immersed in the research.

### **Methods and Procedures**

Recruitment for this research was originally intended to be conducted in the New York City tristate area (NY, NJ, and CT) because of its proximity and ease of access to the intended population. In order to recruit both gay and heterosexual participants, a presentation was given by me to a gay-inclusive church in New York City and postings about the study were distributed throughout parts of New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut. The distribution areas included churches and community centers in New York City, parts of New Jersey and parts of Connecticut. In addition, an online gay networking newsletter was used to solicit participation. Because I was unable to reach a wide range of respondents using this method the protocol for this study was changed several times; each time receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Consequently, it was decided by me and the IRB Chair that the creation of

an online social media page would better suit the recruitment for this study. A Facebook page was created to inform and solicit potential participants. The Facebook page also was approved by the IRB.

The page, entitled *Marriage in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, was created by me after receiving the university's IRB approval. The page went live on August 29, 2014, thus initiating recruitment, and was taken down December 28, 2014, after it was deemed, in consultation with my dissertation committee chair, that the data were saturated and no further interviews were needed. A professional photograph and a short biography of me as the investigator were posted on the page as a means of engaging potential participants. A notice informing participants of the nature of the study also was posted. Interested respondents were informed that the sole purpose of the Facebook page was to serve as the initial conduit between themselves and the researcher. Through the Facebook page, potential participants were given the investigator's contact information. In this way, potential respondents initiated contact.

The project was open to individuals across the United States who self-identified as a heterosexual or homosexual person, who had been or was currently living in a committed relationship with one person that they viewed as a spouse, and who perceived the relationship as a marriage. Participation was limited to heterosexual and homosexual adults between the ages of 25 and 85 who self-identified as American citizens. Participants were required to speak Standard English fluently and be willing to share their experience(s) of marriage through tape-recorded telephone or face-to-face interviews. Recruitment was also conducted through the use of an online gay networking newsletter

(rainbowdeecomingevents.com), and through a formal presentation that was given by the investigator to a gay-inclusive church located in Greenwich Village, New York.

Contingent upon participating in this study, respondents were assured that their identities would be kept anonymous. Therefore, no participant's name appeared in the study, on the data analysis, or on any of the research instruments; all descriptions have been de-identified.

### **Semi-structured Interviewing**

Research interviews may be structured or semi-structured, depending on what it is the researcher is trying to uncover (Jamshed, 2014). During a structured interview, the researcher asks each participant the same series of questions (Hesse-Biber, & Leavy, 2006; Jamshed, 2014). "Ultimately a structured interview allows for a greater degree of comparison between interviews because the resulting data has a higher degree of standardization" (Hesse-Biber, & Leavy, 2006, p. 125). Semi-structured interviews are often used by qualitative researchers because it allows the researcher some flexibility with regard to how and in what order questions are asked, while making sure that all participants are being asked the same questions (Jamshed, 2014; Hesse-Biber, & Leavy, 2006). This "preserves a degree of comparability across interviews" (Shank, 2006, p. 50). Semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth questions were used to gather data for this study.

Audio-taping and transcription of the sessions were my responsibility. In order to maintain participant confidentiality, all participants were identified by an assigned code which included a letter of the alphabet and a number of the interview session. No identifiable information about the participants was included on any document. The purpose of the study, confidentiality, and risks and benefits for participating in the study

were reviewed with each participant before each interview session. A review of informed consent procedures and questions and concerns participants had were also addressed before each interview. All documentation was read and signed prior to the scheduling of each interview. All written information was kept in a locked metal file cabinet in my home.

### **Source of the Questions**

Qualitative researchers have a very different viewpoint from quantitative researchers. (Fink, 2000). Qualitative researchers ask *why*, while quantitative researchers tend to ask questions pertaining to quantities, such as, *how many?* (Fink, 2000). “The research technique which the qualitative researcher uses is then to isolate and define phenomena/categories during the process of research in order to comprehend and learn...” (Fink, 2000, para. 7). I created the following questions, conducted the interviews and controlled how the interviews progressed, consequently becoming the instrument used to interview the participants. Following are the questions that served as the driving force behind this study:

How do homosexual and heterosexual people in committed relationships that they perceive as marriages make meaning of their marriages?

- ❖ How do homosexual and heterosexual adults experience commitment in their marriage?
- ❖ How does the meaning that people apply to their marriages reveal a deeper meaning to marriage in 21<sup>st</sup> century America?
- ❖ Do lived-experiences of same-sex couples in committed relationships that they view as marriage differ from those of their heterosexual counterparts?



- ❖ What do these experiences say about committed human relational experiences?

According to Wang (2008), “the questions that qualitative researchers ask their participants and the methods that they utilize to observe certain phenomena are all ‘filtered’ through the researchers lenses of knowledge, language, values, and worldviews” (p. 259). Husserl (1913) asserts that human beings not only physically *experience* the world around them, but that they *perceive* the world through their memory. Husserl (1913) proposed that our perceptions about things live in our recollection of those things. Epoché, or suspension of judgment, is the procedure used to reduce or bracket what we believe to be inherently true about the thing for which we are studying (Husserl, 1913). To prevent my personal judgements from tainting the information that was being shared by the participants, I kept a journal to “bracket” my presuppositions about the phenomenon (marriage) and the process in general. In this way I was able to establish and maintain a clear view of the participants’ lived experiences (Cogan, 2016). The following 10 protocol questions were formulated by using van Manen’s (1990) four existentials as a guide.

1. How do you define marriage?
  - a. How has your definition changed over the years?
  - b. Describe some experiences that helped you create your definition of marriage?
2. At what point in your relationship did you feel married to your spouse?
  - a. Please describe in detail the emotion(s) you experienced when you felt married to your spouse.

- b. How much value do you place on being married?
- 3. How would you describe the experience of being married to a person who has never experienced it?
  - a. What does being married feel like?
  - b. How did you know when your spouse was the “one”?
- 4. What was the internal feeling you had when you realized that you were going to be with this person for the rest of your life?
- 5. How would you describe the home you’ve built together?
- 6. What makes the person you’ve chosen as your life-long commitment stand out from anyone else you’ve dated?
- 7. Please describe your relationship.
- 8. Have you ever felt like leaving the relationship? If so, what made you stay?
- 9. How has the world treated you since you became a partner in your committed relationship?
- 10. Is there a question you felt I should have asked but overlooked?

## Data Collection, Coding, and Analysis

Defining marriage has been an issue that has plagued American society for several years (Steinmetz, 2013). The initial question of this study regards understanding the lived-experiences of marriage for heterosexual and homosexual individuals and couples, in order to illuminate the underlying meaning of marriage for the participants of this study. According to Weiss (1995), analysis that deals with learning about an issue from respondents is called *Issue-Focused Analysis*. The data for this study was analyzed to yield emerging themes through Weiss' (1995) process of issue-focused analysis. The analytic processes that lead to issue-focused analysis, are coding, sorting, local integration, and inclusive integration (Weiss, 1995).

Weiss (1995) asserts that the following four analytic processes are unequivocal when producing issue-focused analysis. They are explained here:

- *Coding* is the process used to link the participant's comments to the ideas and theories used in the research.
- *Sorting* involves categorizing the codes into separate files or headings, thereby creating narrower topics.
- *Local integration* is a summary of the coding and files. It is a method of organization that integrates what the researcher has observed and understood in each area of questioning. Local integration brings a comprehensibility and meaning to the summary files.
- *Inclusive integration* takes the summary to the next level by weaving the complete story together. (Weiss, 1995)

The data for this research included the following components: transcribed digital audio-recordings of the semi-structured interviews, notes on my observations of voice inflections and long pauses that may have reflected the respondent's mood or stress level, and my journal of self-reflection. The most effective way to code the data was to create a chart on which I could list all of the research questions alongside the theories used to guide the inquiry. I then took the transcribed interviews and linked the participants' key phrases to the theories. The key phrases were determined by numbering how many times a description or statement was used to describe an experience. I then *sorted* and categorized the codes into separate headings and used *Local Integration* to compare what was said in each particular area with what I believed to be the meaning that the participant was trying to convey. Once the meanings became clear, I used *Inclusive Integration* to push forward these meanings into analytic categories or headings, which subsequently allowed the underlying meaning of marriage for these participants, to unfold. The analytic categories were:

1. Attachment
  - a. Examines how a member of a couple attaches to his or her spouse
  - b. Explores the differences between how heterosexually and homosexually orientated people attach to their spouses.
2. Societal, community, and familial impact on marriage (Bronfenbrenner)
  - a. Examines the role society, community, and family plays
  - b. Examines education's influence on marriage/long-term committed relationships

### 3. Lived Existentials

- a. Examines van Manen's Four Existentials
- b. Examines the differences and similarities of participant perceived marital relationship experiences

Through a process of repeatedly reviewing and sorting through the recorded and transcribed interviews, I was able to sift out the material that I understood to be important to the study. As I filtered out data, I chose the similar, pertinent, and meaningful statements and descriptions made by the participants that accurately represented what they were trying to convey. Throughout the process I remained aware of my presuppositions and bracketed them so that they would not influence my interpretation of what the respondents were saying, which could possibly affect what might emerge from the data.

The extracted statements were then sorted, compiled with other similar statements, and matched to the three theories that were used to guide the research (attachment theory, bio-ecological theory, and van Manen's four existentials). By doing this, I was able to see recurrent patterns emerging from the participants' dialogue. The recurrent patterns that emerge in the data are known as *themes* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). It is these emerging themes that give meaning to the participant's experience of life in their marriages. The connections made between themes are referred to as relationships (Wang, 2008) and "[through] development of themes and relationships, the essence of a phenomenon is revealed" (Wang, 2008, p. 292).

After each interview, I sat quietly for one-half hour to reflect on what stood out during the interview. I wrote down my thoughts concerning the interaction between me and the participant, as well as any new biases that may have surfaced. On the day following each interview, I listened to the previous day's interview with the intent of catching patterns in the dialogue that I may have missed.

I also reviewed my interviewing techniques for areas upon which I could improve. As the interviewing process continued, I started transcribing earlier interviews. I also used this time to listen to the interviews again with my mind focused on the research questions, the answers provided and the theories that I used to guide the research. This process was helpful when listening for emerging themes. Shank (2006) notes that "researchers must sort their data and choose which data to pay attention to and which to ignore" (p. 146). Shank (2006) further explains how themes in qualitative analysis emerge from the data:

What emerges, after much hard work and creative thought, is an awareness in the mind of the researcher that there are patterns of order that seem to cut across various aspects of the data. When these patterns become organizational, and when they characterize different segments of data, then we can call them *themes*.

(Shank, 2006, p. 149)

### **Summary**

The methods that a researcher uses to uncover information about a phenomenon, is the rationale that explains why the researcher is exploring the phenomenon in a particular way (Kallet, 2004). There are various methods used in research (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivligham, 2008). Methods vary by the type of data collected, the sources

of information, and the sampling techniques and instruments used (Heppner, Wampold & Kivlighan, 2008; Kallet, 2004). Qualitative methodology was used for this study.

Qualitative studies, according to Heppner, et al, (2008) “emphasizes the importance of context in helping us understand a phenomenon of interest” (p.257). The phenomenon of interest for this study is the underlying meaning that couples or individuals (regardless of sexual orientation) place on marriage through their lived-experiences. Because marriage is experienced by human beings and the inquiry questions how homosexual and heterosexual people in committed relationships that they perceive as marriages make meaning of their marriage, this research is a study in human science.

The purpose of human science is to develop an understanding of the meaning placed on a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). In order to gain understanding of the meaning these participants placed on their marriages, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used. “Phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). Hermeneutics is the approach in which phenomenological data are interpreted and analyzed (Kinsella, 2006). Therefore, hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry explores and interprets the deepest meaning of a person’s lived experience (Kinsella, 2006).

Research design refers to the blueprint or step-by-step plan formulated by the researcher to answer the research question (Heppner, Wampold & Kivlighan, 2008). Purposive sampling is a type of sampling where the sample size is usually quite small and focuses on particular characteristics of a population in order to best answer the research question(s) (LUND Research, Ltd., 2012). Homogeneous sampling, a purposive sampling

technique aimed at gathering a small sampling unit that shares the same characteristics or traits (LUND Research, Ltd., 2012) was used to recruit participants for this study.

Through the use of social media, a Facebook page was created by the researcher to recruit participants for this study. Permission was granted by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The study was open to heterosexual and homosexual men and women across the United States who self-identified as American citizens and who were between the ages of 25 and 85 years of age. The size of the sample (12) allowed the researcher the space and time to become immersed in the research while maintaining an appropriate association with the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher, which allowed for flexibility in how and in what order the questions were asked. Data collection and analysis also were conducted by the researcher to yield emerging themes through a process called *Issue-focused Analysis* (Weiss, 1995). Issue-focused analysis uses four analytic processes when analyzing data known as: *Coding*, *Sorting*, *Local Integration* and *Inclusive Integration* (Weiss, 1995). Coding links the participant's comments to the ideas and theories used in the research (Weiss, 1995). Sorting categorizes the codes and a summarization of the researcher's understanding and observations of each category is presented in what is known as local integration. Finally, inclusive integration weaves all of the themes together in a way that completes the story (Weiss, 1995).



## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to bring to light the underlying meaning of marriage in its most basic and invariable nature. The process that qualitative researchers use to meet such goals follows a basic pattern: 1) collect the data, 2) analyze and interpret the data, and 3) attempt to refine the interpretation of the data (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivligham, 2008; Weiss, 1995). According to Heppner et al. (2008), “Interpretation... is aimed at extracting meaning and identifying context. Rather than providing a theory of a specific phenomenon by relating themes, interpretation addresses more global issues” (p. 293). In the case of the present research, the global issue being addressed concerns marriage, specifically, how people in relationships that they perceive as marriages make meaning of their relationships and define the underlying meaning of marriage for them through their lived-experiences.

There are different processes used to interpret qualitative data. For this research, I used what Weiss (1995) refers to as *Local Integration*, which is defined later in this chapter. Chapter 4 provides the reader with a summary of the data that were collected for each of the questions being asked of the 12 respondents. An explanation of how the interviews were solicited and conducted also is provided. The process of how the data are linked to the three theories that guide the inquiry (Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth, 1972), Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological theory of Human Development (1977), and van Manen’s Four Lived-existentials (1990)) further explains the interpretive process of analysis here. Finally, I offer a short narrative of my

experience while conducting this research. In it I address my presuppositions and thoughts following the experience.

### **Participant Demographics**

Table 1 is a breakdown of the demographic characteristics of the participants in this study. The research interviews were conducted from September 2014 to January 2015. Six females and six males participated in this research. Nine of the participants self-identified as heterosexual, two as gay, and one as lesbian. A Facebook page was set up to target adults ranging in age from 25 through 85 years in order to recruit people whose relationships may have lasted for several years. The ages of the participants ranged from mid-30s to early-80s. Eight respondents self-identified as having a European heritage, two self-identified as White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP), one self-identified as African American, and one self-identified as Cajun. Of the 12 respondents, nine were currently legally married and of those nine, four were legally remarried, and one was cohabiting. Of the final three, one was living in a civil union, one was divorced, and one was widowed. All respondents were currently living in the United States.

Of the 12 interviews, 10 were conducted via telephone and two were face-to-face. The two face-to-face interviews were conducted at an agreed upon location suggested by the participants. A Consent to Participate form was mailed through the U.S. Postal Service or via email. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, I contacted the participant and scheduled the interview. At the start of each interview, participants were informed that there would be approximately 17 questions, with the first seven pertaining to demographics. A digital recorder was used by me during each interview and participants were informed when the recorder was operable. Prior to the start of each interview,

participants were reminded by me of the purpose of the interview and of their freedom to answer only those questions they felt comfortable answering.

Table 1.

## Participant Demographics

<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Hetero</b> 9	<b>Homo</b> 3	<b>Prior marriages of the remarried people</b>
<b>Gender</b>	F 6	M 6	
<b>Age</b>	<b>Hetero</b> F/M	<b>Homo</b> F/M	
30-40	0/0	1/0	
41-50	0/0	0/2	
51-60	3/3	0/0	
61-90	2/1	0/0	
<b>Cultural Background:</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	
African American	0	1	
WASP	2	0	
European	6	2	
Hispanic	0	0	
Asian	0	0	
Cajun	1	0	
<b>Current Legal Marital Status:</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>Black Male:</b> Two prior marriages: Marriage A: 3 years, Marriage B: 2.5 years <b>White Female:</b> One prior marriage: 58 years <b>White Male:</b> Two prior marriages: Marriage A: 23 years, Marriage B: 33 years <b>White female:</b> One prior marriage: 30 years
Married (4 Remarried/1 Cohabiting)	9	1	
Civil Union	0		
Divorced	1		
Widowed	1		
<b>Current State:</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	
NY	3		
TN	3		
PA	3	2	
TX	0	1	
<b>Current Years together:</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	
Less than 10	1	1	
10-20	0		
21-30	4	1	
31-40	5		

## **Individual Participant Interviews**

This section discusses the interviewing, analysis, and coding processes. Researcher presuppositions are addressed to highlight and address researcher bias. I scheduled, conducted, and analyzed all of the interviews. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded. A file was made for each participant with a coded name to identify the participant. No identifying information was printed on the files or on any of the instruments used to conduct the research. Notes from the interviews were kept in the file pertaining to that participant and secured in a locked filing cabinet in my home. A reflexive journal was kept to note researcher bias, thoughts, and views that arose prior to and after the interview.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to structure the interviews, which allowed me room to probe deeper when needed. The semi-structured interview also allowed for a conversation to occur between me and participant while simultaneously creating a more meaningful understanding of the participants' marital experiences. Although I have been trained and have extensive experience in counselor interviewing techniques, such as validation, intentionality, and mindfulness, I am a novice to this kind of interviewing. For this reason, it was the responsibility of my dissertation Chair, (an expert with more than 25 years of experience), to supervise me. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

## **Presuppositions**

My first presupposition was that gay and lesbian people who fit the criteria of the study would respond overwhelmingly to the Facebook posting inviting them to participate; unfortunately, this did not occur. Although marriage equality is currently the

law in the United States (Liptak, 2015), at the time of data collection only 37 states (AL, AK, AZ, CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, HI, ID, IA, IL, IN, KS, ME, MD, MA, MN, MT, NC, NH, NJ, NM, NV, NY, OK, OR, PA, RI, SC, UT, VA, VT, WA, WV, WI, and WY) and Washington, DC had made marriage equality a reality for gay and lesbian couples (Freedom to Marry, 2015). According to Freedom to Marry (2015), the nationwide campaign to win marriage equality, “Nearly 72% of the U.S. population lives in a state currently issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples state-wide” (p. 1). It was my belief that as momentum was moving toward marriage equality in the United States, gay people would be willing to discuss their relationships that they viewed as marriages. A Pew Research Center (2013) survey of LGBT Americans showed that of the respondents they surveyed,

86% say they have told one or more close friends about their sexual orientation or gender identity. And some 54% say all or most of the important people in their life know that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. (p. 1)

In light of these statistics and the overall general change in attitude and acceptance of gay and lesbian people in America, I believed that gay and lesbian men and women would be eager and willing to share their stories, with the assurance that their anonymity would be secured. What I failed to realize was that even though acceptance for LGBT people was on the rise (PEW, 2013), the history of anti-gay discrimination in America (Meyer, 2003; National Alliance on Mental Health, 2016) made it a challenge to secure a trusting relationship with potential gay participants.

Discrimination against LGBT people is commonplace. Gay, lesbian or bisexual people are 10 times more likely to experience discrimination based on sexual

orientation as compared to heterosexual people. Mistreatment comes in many forms, from seemingly benign jokes, to verbal insults, unequal treatment and in the most extreme cases, physical violence. Further, for many LGBT people, the bias is everywhere and lasts their lifetime: at home, school, work and in the community. (Friedman, 2014, para. 2)

The second presupposition was my belief that establishing a time requirement of 30 or more years would provide the best information from people who were living in what they viewed as marital relationships. Therefore, I made 30 years or longer a time requirement for participation in the study. It was my thought that the longer the perceived marriage, the more robust the information would be. However, several people contacted me and reasonably requested that I change this requirement. As discussed in Chapter 2, van Manen (1990) describes this existential as *lived-time* or *temporality*, which refers to how we experience the lapsing of time. By omitting the time requirement, I opened the door for individuals to determine for themselves the definition of long-term and allowed individuals the space to discuss how they experienced time in their relationships during the interviews.

The third and last presupposition pertains to socialization and gender differences. It was my belief that more women than men would be willing to share their stories. This idea came from knowing that the targeted population would have been raised anywhere from 1935 to 1970 and that throughout that time in history the socialization processes for girls and boys were very different from how they are today (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987). In an article examining the social supports among older men and women, Antonucci and Akiyama (1987) found that women have larger social support networks

than men. Their findings also showed that women's supports, that is, other women, were in some instances viewed as confidants, whereas men saw their wives as confidants. It was my belief that women would be more apt to discuss their intimate relationships with another woman, which was proven to be incorrect.

### **Process of Participant Interview Analysis**

Prior to conducting this research, it was suggested to me by my dissertation committee chair that I keep a reflective journal to write down my biases and reactions throughout the process. Because journal writing and reflective thinking are parts of my daily routine, incorporating a separate journal for this project was a simple task. I discussed new ideas, strategies, biases, and reactions that I struggled with, with my Chair throughout the process via telephone, email, and scheduled meetings. The reflective journal allowed me a place to put my biases and feelings about issues that were discussed or that may have caused a feeling in me that may have needed further exploration.

The following section illustrates *Coding* or the bringing together of key phrases used by participants to describe their lived experience of marriage linked with the theories used to guide the research. Each participant also is identified by code to maintain anonymity.



## **Participant Narrative Phrases**

Coding. (Continues on following pages)

### **Participant A0204**

Participant A0204 is a heterosexual female, age 55, who has been married for 33 years. She is third generation American with European ancestry. The interview lasted approximately 55 minutes.

### **Analytic Categories**

### **Participant Statement:**

Attachment

“What’s meaningful is...to be able to say things I would not to another human being outside the marriage. ...to be able to admit to fears, fantasies, ahh, you know, thoughts that may not be something that, you know, that may not be appreciated in society. To be able to heal things through giving each other emotional support while we delve through those things. ...and you know, just having a companion. Having somebody to sit down with at the end of, you know, a long week. ...somebody to chat with and share things with.”

Societal, communal, and familial impact on marriage

“When we got married...there were still, umm, rather firm gender roles. Ahh, there were more women in the work place, but it was still kind of understood that, you know, he was more responsible for the

economic health of our family and I was more responsible for the home front and that...we would love each other, but that friends would take a very important place in our lives. I think there was less of an understanding of that intimacy, emotional intimacy, and more of an understanding of a kind of a social contract...of ahh, you know, providing a stable family and stable economic unit of society.”

“Well, you know, my family would have been mad at me if we just lived together. We felt like we would be upsetting parents and grandparents, so I felt, that is we really wanted to be together, we should get married.

#### Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation

“What’s meaningful is the ability to be fully ourselves.” “There is a sort of merging that happens. You keep your individual personality and your individual desires but you also have this second life as part of a unit...the US becomes every bit as important as the ME.”

- Lived-Body “I shook all the way down the aisle. Oh crap!” [I felt] “Excitement, joy and fear” “He made me feel really safe.” “We woke up in each other’s arms ...and it hit me, OH MY GOD, THIS IS MY HUSBAND! We are married and this is different now. It was a very weird feeling.”
- Lived-Time “We dated for a year and a half before we actually got married but I was pretty sure within a month.”
- Lived-Space X

### **Participant B0107**

Participant B0107 is a heterosexual male, age 56, who has been married for over 30 years. He is an Italian American. This interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes.

### **Analytic Categories**

Attachment

### **Participant Statement:**

“When two people look at each other and without speaking a word, know what each other’s heart is saying; that’s a special communication. And when two people feel so safe, that they can be vulnerable, that they allow the other one literally, they put their heart in the other person’s hand. They hold it for today and everyday it’s renewed.”

Societal, communal, and familial  
impact on marriage

“They were very strict conservative all the way.  
Ahh, traditional right down to the bone, you name it.  
...The man’s role is this. The woman’s role is this.  
The man always does these things. The woman  
always does these things.”

#### Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation

“The most important part for me is best friends. I can  
tell her anything and she can tell me anything.” “It’s  
just the two of you. That special bond between the  
two of you that no one else can have.”

- Lived-Body

“If I feel safe enough to tell her then I don’t have to  
hide it, my feelings or my emotions. So any  
negative emotions I’m feeling I can still talk to her  
about.... She feels safe with me and I feel safe with  
her....I wanted to hold her. I just wanted to hold her  
and the thing was that it wasn’t sexual. The whole  
thing, sex was not a part of it. Sex had nothing to do  
with it. It was just, WOW!”

- Lived-Time

“I felt married before the quote unquote wedding.”

- Lived-Space

“And going home, we went home, where she was  
living, I lived upstairs from her parents’ house.... I

just looked over and I realized, everyone thinks that we are a couple. And then I realized, but we are!

### **Participant C0103**

Participant C0103 is a heterosexual female, age 80, whose combined marriages lasted 59 years. She identifies as WASP. This interview lasted approximately one hour.

#### **Analytic Categories**

Attachment

#### **Participant Statement:**

“I have to say that my husband [Name] and I enjoy more common interests than me and my late husband had. And I think that we communicate better.

Re: First Husband: “He was closed up. I have no doubt ...when he proposed that he had feelings for me as I had for him, but umm, you know, when you’re really young like that it’s kind of hard to handle and when we got married, or when he proposed, he said, ‘If it doesn’t work out, we’ll just get a divorce.’”

Societal, communal, and familial impact on marriage

“I was working when I met my husband and I worked through my whole married life, practically. I almost think, well this sounds cruel, but I almost think the work kept me sane...My son and my

daughter, well, I think that they probably didn't think that I should get married again. They want to see me happy. ...My son and my daughter-in-law said that if we were living together that we should get married.

"It [marriage] wasn't drummed into us, so to speak, but my father and mother would have had a 75 year marriage had my dad lived till, a few more months."

#### Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation

"We had so many things in common. ...and doing things together and it felt comfortable; it felt right."  
"[Husband's name] inspires me to do more. ...I felt he was 100% behind me. ...I'm going to have to say this, I mean you're gonna be surprised to hear me say it, and we have great sex."

- Lived-Body

"We had so many things in common. ...and doing things together and it felt comfortable; it felt right."  
"[Husband's name] inspires me to do more. ...I felt he was 100% behind me. ...I'm going to have to say this, I mean you're gonna be surprised to hear

me say it, and we have great sex.”

“I got the flutters when we talked on the phone.”

- Lived-Time

“I felt married before we were. Umm, technically and officially, it was probably when he proposed.”

“Umm, when I was younger it seemed to go slowly, then as I got older it seemed to go quicker.” “And so in contrast to knowing someone three months and becoming engaged and young and green and everything like that, [husband] and I knew each other for almost three years before we got married.”

- Lived-Space

First Marriage: “We bought a two room camper. No water, no electricity. That’s what I moved into when I got married. ...and the first winter we closed off the living room essentially where we had a sofa bed and we slept on a roll away cot in the kitchen with refrigerator, the stove, the table, the chairs, and a motorcycle.”

## **Participant D0205**

Participant D0205 identifies as an 83-year-old heterosexual male of Swiss and German background. The total of his combined years of marriage is 57. This interview lasted for approximately one hour.

### **Analytic Categories**

### **Participant Statement:**

Attachment

“Well, we communicate a lot. And we’re continually telling each other we love each other. We can talk about anything. We share anything we can and it’s a great feeling. I feel very comfortable in my marriage now.”

Societal, communal, and familial impact on marriage

“Well, number one, my parents never discussed marriage with me. ... When I got married the first time ... they had nothing to say about it.” “I don’t think society defined it for me other than the fact that three months into it we were husband and wife and we tried to work things out. They didn’t always work out.”

Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation

“We share everything together. Good, bad, or indifferent. Open communication. And that umm, if there’s a problem, we solve it. [Wife’s name] and I



have a situation that when we get mad we don't argue, we just growl and then laugh."

- Lived-Body

"You have to originally feel comfortable with someone, love them."

- Lived-Time

"Two years before the ceremony [I felt she was my wife]." "...if [wife's name] and I were married 60 years ago, I can't say that we wouldn't be done, but with our experience now, I think it would have been fantastic! We'd probably have 20 kids!"

- Lived-Space

"We used to live in a two bedroom mobile, then her daughter and husband moved in. Then her other daughter came in and her first daughter's youngest son moved in...I said I'm getting tired of it. I'm going to leave."

### **Participant E0103**

Participant E0103 identifies as a 79 year old, heterosexual female whose cultural background is Italian and Czechoslovakian. She was widowed after 36 years of marriage. This interview lasted for approximately one hour.

#### **Analytic Categories**

Attachment

#### **Participant Statement:**

“I think that the reason I married so young was the fact that my mother had died. ...you know in those days they didn’t have grief counseling and therapy and all that. I probably needed that. So, in the sense, my husband came along and I felt very safe.”

Societal, communal, and familial  
impact on marriage

“My father said to me no woman trusts her life to a man until she can support herself. And he made me go to ...learn to type and take shorthand.

...anyway, he wouldn’t ok a wedding until I did that and got a job.”

“In hindsight I was too young to appreciate his situation, but in hindsight I appreciate it. Ah, he was caught in the middle...he’d say, but she’s my mother and she means well. I just don’t think she has to know everything. ...they wouldn’t even give us our own mailbox. She saw my mail, commented

on it. You know it was difficult

#### Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation  
“In the beginning was, I lost my individuality in losing myself in my marriage. So I guess you could say that was the most married I was and then when I realized I was a person with needs and they may be different, it was a bit of a shock and also a stress on the relationship.”
- Lived-Body  
“I always felt incomplete and so I went back to college”
- Lived-Time  
“But I was too young when I married. I was only 19, and it didn’t, you know, my father tried to tell me that we were very different. He was 21, and you like what you think you want now, you might think differently after you finish college.”
- Lived-Space  
“We had two kids and we wanted to buy our own house, so they had a two-family home and they suggested that we live upstairs. ...the invasion on our privacy by her, not my father-in-law; I mean she had to know everything about everything and when we weren’t there, she snuck into our

apartment...I said you have two choices, a wife in Creedmoor or we buy a house.”

### **Participant B0307**

Participant B0307 identifies as a 59-year-old, WASP, heterosexual woman. She divorced after 30 years of marriage and has been in a cohabiting relationship for the past 10 years. This interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes.

### **Analytic Categories**

Attachment

### **Participant Statement:**

“I grew very very close to um, you know, my ex’s aunts and uncles and their extended families. Um, you know, it was an experience that I never had in my own family because I didn’t have any extended family. ...we just didn’t connect with each other one-on-one. Our connection was more through family things. My ex and I, you know, those moments were so brief when we really were connected with each other. We both led our own lives pretty much.”

Societal, communal, and familial impact on marriage

“I called my parents right before I was walking out to the Justice of the Peace and said—my sister called and said... is getting married. I did not make the phone call. It [getting married] wasn’t my

decision.... I think I pretty much took that from television shows...the husband and wife always agreed on pretty much on how to rear the children and umm ...they never really argued....”

#### Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation  
“I—our lives had been so chaotic, emotionally chaotic that I think jeez, oh man, it was like a trickle-down effect, you know? [Child’s name] really lost out on a lot. And so did I as a parent because I am a firm believer that a 17-year-old girl should not be having babies.”
- Lived-Body  
“I do, you know, ahh, have pangs of guilt, but, you know, I’m not married in the eye of the Church so to speak.”
- Lived-Time  
“Ya know, umm, in some ways it went by pretty quickly. You know, in spite of- you know, my marriage was pretty horrible.”
- Lived-Space  
X

### **Participant A0304**

Participant A0304 self-identifies as a 60-year-old African American male. He has been married three times, with his most recent marriage lasting 25 years. This interview lasted approximately 35 minutes.

#### **Analytic Categories**

#### **Participant Statement**

Societal, communal, and familial  
impact on marriage

“Well, umm, marriage was never defined to me. I learned from what I saw, which wasn’t good. My father was a woman beater. Ahh, I had problems with that. I didn’t like that. Ahh, my mother ahh, really didn’t go into marriage with me...I got married the first time, I got married because I got the girl pregnant and I felt obligated to do that. ...the second one was a date pick...but she liked drugs more than anything else.”

Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation

“It would be the faithfulness, the comradery, um, the ...ah I guess mostly the faithfulness and the comradery”

- Lived-Body

“I don’t act like I used to act. I don’t do what I used to do. Um, I had to forgive myself first and then

ahh, I don't ask a lot of questions because what you did in your past is your past... I had to change. I had to accept myself in order to be accepted."

- Lived-Time

"Ah, my time has been good in this one because I'm not who I was."

- Lived-Space

"My daughter, she don't like to bring the boys around because I'll ask them the hard questions: What do you want? ...Why are you here? LOL Yea, because you really don't know who you are until someone asks you. LOL that's kind of self-discovery. Who are you? What keeps you? What makes you whole...And once you find that out, that means you can go on with your life."

### **Participant D0305**

Participant D0305 self-identifies as a 58-year-old, heterosexual male of German, Slovak, and Italian ancestry. He has been married for 34 years. This interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes.

### **Analytic Categories**

Attachment

### **Participant Statement:**

"Um, the commitment, the trust, umm, you know you have a friend, although I don't like to overlap that a lot. But you do have somebody in your

corner, you know?

Societal, communal, and familial  
impact on marriage

“Well, I bought into that whole thing, you know, married until death. (Laughing). Umm, my family, her family as well, umm, was... very close and ahh, one marriage until death do us part kind of thing. Umm, very committal, very trustworthy, very open. That’s how it was defined to us. That’s how we understood marriage. That’s how we took it and that’s how we’ve lived it over the years.” “Society now, I don’t think they perceive marriage as a total commitment.”

Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation

“She can form an opinion, she can do multiple things. So I, I like that. I’m not gonna take advantage of her, ya know, but when she’s able to do that for me, it helps. She has a way of putting me at ease, a way of explaining things, a way of kind of taking the edge off a bit. [I think I give her] security. I would hope. Umm, you know, unconditional love.... Yea, we have arguments... but, you know, we’ve gotten to the point at our age, where, you know, we look at



things and really, is this something that we need to argue about?”

- Lived-Body

“It was euphoria! That feeling when I just always wanted to be with her and if I couldn’t, I just wanted to talk with her over the phone.”

- Lived-Time

“Fleeting. Yes. It’s like we were married, a year and a half later we bought the house, we had our daughter, a couple years later we had our son and then you just get immersed in the total dependency, you know, that those children rely on you and that’s your focus. ...Now we’ve come full circle, now we’re back home, and now we’re starting to enjoy being together, not that we didn’t.”

- Lived Space

“We are able to pick up and go at our leisure, eat when we want to, don’t eat when we don’t want to, go where we want to go. You know? It’s nice.”

### **Participant B0707**

Participant B0707 self-identifies as a 56-year-old heterosexual female of Italian, German and English ancestry. She has been married for 34 years. This interview lasted for approximately 50 minutes.

### **Analytic Categories**

### **Participant Statement:**

Attachment

“There is a connection that you have that, umm, you don’t have with anybody else. ...you just know what they’re feeling; you know what they’re going through. You don’t even have to talk or be in the same room, you don’t have to talk. You can just read their expressions, just—you just know them. You know what they’re going to say. You know how they’re going to react to things.”

Societal, communal, and familial  
impact on marriage

“My home-life played a part. Umm, my parents were married for 52 years and they went through struggles just like any, you know, family did. And it, you know, divorce wasn’t an option. You just worked through them and that’s the way we handled our marriage, you know?” “It was just; people got through school, got married, and had kids. ...That was the thing to do.”

Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation

“You just know when you meet somebody that you can’t live without them. You always want to be talking to them, you always want to tell them about your day, you just—it’s your other half.”

- Lived-Body “Excitement! I mean, yea, yea, exciting because we were both planning our lives.”
- Lived-Time “Oh my goodness, they flew! Flew. I cannot believe we’re married 34 years. I plan on being married for 34 more but umm, yea. There was no time. I can still think of the wedding day verbatim. I mean I can play that whole day like it was yesterday. Yea.” “And I guess I thought I was getting old at 21, 22... I guess because back then thirty-something years ago, everybody got married in their early twenties, you know?”
- Lived Space X

### **Participant C0303**

Participant C0303 identifies as a 45-year-old homosexual male of Italian and Irish ancestry. He states that he has been emotionally and physically married to his spouse for 21 years. Their marriage was federally recognized in 2014. This interview lasted 1 hour.

### **Analytic Categories**

Attachment

### **Participant Statement:**

“The primary thing was that we knew deep down in our hearts that we belonged to each other. That it was a spiritual thing that would last through eternity. That we would never doubt it or question

it. That it was passionate and it was, umm, it was also an affinity, an affinity of personality...we see each other as perfectly complimenting each other too.”

Societal, communal, and familial  
impact on marriage

“I think being well educated and seeing one’s life as one’s own, to do with what one pleases has certainly been instilled within me early in life and I think it sort of enabled me to feel a little empowered.”

#### Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation

“We’ve had ups and downs and we’ve had difficulties, umm, it’s not been ahh, under any practical terms, a totally smooth transition, but I would say we knocked it out.”

- Lived-Body

“I found it very tumultuous to be in love and I didn’t know what that was and I never felt that before.”

- Lived-Time

“From the fall of 1987 when we fell in love to today, that love that we have for one another has been totally consistent.”

- Lived Space

“We moved into an apartment together in 2002 that

we shared and then we bought a home together; the same home that we're in now."

### **Participant D0505**

Participant D0505 identifies as a 48-year-old homosexual male of Italian ancestry. He has been married for 21 years, and his marriage has been federally recognized for one year. This interview lasted approximately 55 minutes.

### **Analytic Categories**

### **Participant Statement:**

Attachment

"Umm, you know, we argue a lot about certain things and when we get to the root of it, the things that we argue about, and those arguments occur when we are not on the same page. Umm, and it's not out of anger or meanness, or jealousy or anything like that. It's like a desire for, you know, this connection that, you know, obviously is never going to be perfect, umm, but a connection that is, at the end of the day, a safe place for both of us to be. I think safety and I think one of the things that we encouraged for one another is to be one another's advocate."

Societal, communal, and familial impact on marriage

"Both society and my family umm, you know, always defined marriage as, you know, sort of a

man and a woman, umm, you know, my Catholic background, and I never really understood it, somehow over the years decided that marriage would be a vehicle for procreation. But umm, the thing that amazed me though, was going to weddings...I used to look forward to that so much that as a little boy I used to think how much fun it will be when I am able to get married. And as I grew older and as I questioned my own sexuality, there was a period of time when I finally felt alienated by that because I didn't think that that was something that would be a part of who I am and where my life is."

#### Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation

"And I remember when I first brought [Name] home as my friend from the seminary. My dad knew right away that there was more to that relationship than just my friend from the seminary. ...Now he didn't want to hear that we were ready to hold hands and skip down the street, ya know."

- Lived-Body

"I feel when we finally recognized that we were in love with one another, it was designed to be with

one another, as crazy as that might sound, I always felt that he was a part of my life even when we weren't together. I actually, I entered another relationship with another guy, you know. We lived together and it had never, it was never the right thing, you know? It was a good friendship and, but it was never, it was never that sense that this is where I'm meant to be. ...I always felt that my heart was elsewhere. And my heart ached to be with him."

- Lived-Time

"It was the first night when I moved into the seminary. And it was the evening time and I was heading to the chapel, and there was [Name], and he was talking to one of the priests. ...and he looked at me and I looked at him and we both smiled at each other, and I just remember the very first time I saw him."

- Lived-Space

"And uh, we were, we were ahh, we were in my room and we were talking and we just spent the entire night talking to one another. And looking at one another and smiling at one another and we were just kind of holding one another and nothing

happened sexually, but it felt so at home and it felt like, oh, this could be very dangerous.”

### **Participant E0303**

Participant E0303 identifies as a 38-year-old lesbian of Cajun ancestry. Although she and her wife have been together for 6 years, she was previously married to a man for 9.5 years. She and her wife’s relationship was recognized as a Civil Union in the state where they had the ceremony. Since then they have moved to a state that does not recognize their union. This interview lasted 45 minutes.

### **Analytic Categories**

Attachment

### **Participant Statement:**

“I mean a lot of people are like, wait a minute you know, well, it’s the first time that either of us walked into a relationship with our eyes open. Knowing, you know that this was the first time that either of us didn’t want to leave each other.”

Societal, communal, and familial  
impact on marriage

“Society is bigger than my world. In my group of friends and in my family it’s accepted. Well, when I was growing up I was raised Catholic and she, and I did not know anything other than Catholic until I got older and they never really said anything negative about it. But if you’ve ever been around a lot Catholic people, especially in



the 70s and 80s, the way of life was a little bit different.” “It didn’t come directly from my family. It came from outsiders. And when you’re told from outsiders that you need to be married and you need to have children and you need to have a home and things of that nature, whether they are realistic or not, that was there. ...My mom and my stepdad would say things like, ‘Well, we don’t really know anybody who’s gay but we don’t want to have anybody in my family who is gay.’”

#### Four Lived Existentials

- Lived-Relation

“So you see, I cannot rely on a piece of paper to tell me that I love my wife. I can’t rely on a piece of paper to tell me that she loves me. I mean, that’s all there is to it. I mean it has to be a feeling between the two of us.”

- Lived-Body

” And I can’t tell you what it was because it doesn’t have, it doesn’t have a—it’s not something that I can hold, okay? And that feeling has to come from within yourself and whatever it is for you or anybody else, for that matter. I mean

it's that feeling of knowing that you want to be with that person for the rest of your life.... In all my other relationships it was missing, whatever it was, it was missing.

- Lived-Time “But usually the times when we feel like it's going by so slowly is because we're struggling.”
- Lived-Space “You know, like just recently we went through two months of really hard struggle. Umm, we lost our apartment and we lived in a hotel for two months. That was horrible for us, but now that we're in a house, it's frustrating that my house isn't put together.”

### **Post-interview Analysis**

Upon conclusion of the interview process I started to see a consistency in what was being stated about marriage across 11 of the 12 participants. This was indication to me (and in further consultation with my chair), that the data had become saturated. Data saturation in qualitative research means that continued investigation of the research question with more participants will not produce new data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Because this was a small study data saturation was fairly rapid.

I reviewed the notes in my reflexive journal and any notes I had taken during the interviews. I then took the time to highlight and summarize the key words and phrases in the *Participant Narrative Phrases* that described participant experiences as they related

to each of the questions asked. This process is referred to by Weiss (1995) as local integration and brings a comprehensibility and meaning to the participants' narrative phrases. The analytic process or summarization of the coding is what is called *recursive* by qualitative researchers (Borman, LeCompte, & Goetz, 1986). "The logic of recursivity means that the procedures can be repeated indefinitely or until a specific condition is met; in research this means that designs are developmental or emergent" (Borman, et al., 1986, p. 54). Applying the same procedures to each of the interviews allowed certain themes to emerge. The recursivity is reflected in the section entitled: *Summary of Narrative Phrases* where themes emerged and are presented in the following section.

### **Summary of Narrative Phrases**

The summary of narrative phrases reflects what Weiss (1995) refers to as Local Integration. It is the summarization of my understanding and observations of each category that I had created from the theories that I used to gather information. It is a condensing of the participants' words into a more concise understanding of what was being said of their experience of marriage. This process helped to reveal the essence of what was being conveyed to me by these participants about marriage.

### **Attachment:**

- Two people coming together in a spiritual bond
- Committing to each other because of a special connection
- Creating security, protection
- We live for each other

## **Bio-Ecological Theory**

- Union reflected in daily living; acknowledgement of your mate
- Roles are taught
- Sometimes misleading and confusing
- My choice; God's plan
- Familial pressure to marry depends on your sexual orientation
  - Forms of pressure: Bullying and teasing
  - Anger from family
  - Familial expectations
  - Religious expectations
  - Income
  - Children

## **Lived Existentials**

- Lived-Time (Temporality)
  - Marriage is spending time together relating
  - Marry young; girls are getting old at age 21, 22
  - Young people spend a lot of time and energy talking about wedding plans
  - Marriage isn't permanent
  - Marriage changes over time
  - Marriage is every day; eternity
- Lived-Body (Corporeality)
  - Ability to fully be ourselves
  - Excitement! A mixture of emotions!

- Instinctual feeling that this is the person; “I got the flutters.”
- Felt right; I felt safe; felt a pull, attraction; felt so “at home”
- “Marriage is a state of being”
- Fear
- Comfort in knowing that the other is there
- Lived-Relation (Relationality)
  - Communication about everything
  - Sharing everything
  - Being vulnerable and feeling safe, feeling at home
  - Companionship, commitment, compromise
  - Depending on each other
  - Friendship, respect, liking each other
  - Cuddling
- Lived-Space (Spatiality) More emotional space than physical
  - Eternal commitment
  - “A state of being”
  - Peace and contentment
  - A calling, a vocation
  - Comfort in knowing that the other is there

## Themes

Following is an explanation of the four themes that emerged from the summary of narrative phrases. They are *the freedom to be vulnerable with one’s spouse*, *Communication beyond words: Developing the “spiritual connection”*, *Safety*, and

*Marriage as union: Merging two into one.* The first theme, *the freedom to be vulnerable with one's spouse*, emerged when participants shared how they came together with their spouse (attachment). Through attachment couples experienced a need to let down guards that may have been put up in other areas of their lives (workplace, school). Being vulnerable with their spouse, coupled with how their spouse treated them when they were in the vulnerable state, played a significant role in determining the growth of the marriage.

The second theme, *Communication beyond words: Developing the "spiritual connection"* emerged through Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Bio-ecological theory of Human Development. While discussing their daily living routines, participants shared experiences of living life with their spouse in various environments, also referred to as systems (neighborhood, work, school). Participants discussed how they communicated with and advocated for their spouses in their environments. These daily experiences led to a unique communication between the couple.

*Safety* emerged as a theme as a result of knowing that there was someone who advocated and cared for them within their various environments. For the lesbian and gay participants in particular, the feeling of being safe within the marriage was particularly strong. Finally, *Marriage as union: Merging two into one* surfaced as a theme for most of the participants as they shared how the relationship with their spouse was unique and unlike any other relationship in their life.

### **Theme 1. The freedom to be vulnerable with one's spouse.**

Vulnerability emerged as a theme for these participants as they shared how they attached or failed to attach to their spouses. Being in a vulnerable state means that one is

“open to moral attack, criticism, or assault” (Dictionary.com Unabridged) and finds it difficult to defend oneself (Dictionary.com Unabridged). All of the participants discussed the experience of feeling vulnerable early in their relationships with their spouses.

According to Brené Brown (2010), social science researcher at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social work and vulnerability expert, “in order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen” (para. 11). Brown (2010) indicates that at the core of vulnerability is shame, which leads to the fear of not being worthy of connection to another person. According to Brown (2010), “shame is easily understood as the fear of disconnection...” (para. 10).

For the participants of this study, the degree of caring and nurturance received from one spouse in response to the other’s vulnerability either strengthened or weakened the relationship. The ability or inability to be vulnerable led to the development of trust or distrust between the couple. Brown (2013) states that “the willingness to be vulnerable emerged as the single clearest value shared by all women and men whom [she] would describe as ‘wholehearted’, or living from a deep sense of worthiness. They [the participants of her study] attributed everything, from their professional success to their marriages, to their ability to be vulnerable” (p. 40, para. 3). Brown (2010) found that “whole-hearted people...were willing to let go of who they thought they should be in order to be who they were” (para. 17). The emergence of vulnerability as a theme coupled with this understanding of vulnerability sheds light on the fact that marriage starts from within the individual.

## **Theme 2. Communication beyond words: Developing the “spiritual connection.”**

Even though at various points during the interviews all of the participants mentioned that they either experienced or did not experience a spiritual connection with their spouse, an explicit definition of *spiritual connection* was never offered or asked. The concept of spiritual connection was presumed to be understood by the respondents and the interviewer. But what is meant by spiritual connection? According to Deepak Chopra (2011), medical doctor, author, spiritual leader and founder of the Chopra Foundation, the concept of human spirituality is not widely accepted in Western culture because “[w]hatever is invisible has little standing in materialistic culture where reality is defined by science” (para. 1). Chopra (2011) offers the idea that “just as the material world is connected invisibly at the quantum level, the subtle world [spirituality] is connected by a field of consciousness” (para. 4). It is within this field of consciousness that impulses enter and are responded to (Chopra, 2011).

The impulses to which Chopra (2011) refers are characterized here by the energy or thoughts that flow between an individual and his or her spouse. These thoughts are conveyed and experienced through our senses, conversations, glances, smiles, and as one participant stated, “Growls”. Chopra Center certified Ayurvedic lifestyle instructors, Leo and Melissa Carver, Ph.D. (2016) suggest that sharing one’s deepest thoughts, having open communication with one’s spouse and allowing each other to fully be themselves is what creates that spiritual relationship. By taking the risk to share of oneself with one’s spouse, most participants created a space of vulnerability, which, when nurtured and respected led to the spiritual connection that 11 of the 12 participants in this study described.



### **Theme 3. Safety.**

According to *Child, Adolescent, Couples, and Family* therapy psychologist, Dr. Jeffrey Bernstein (2014), “When you feel safe in your relationship you can express your emotional needs and be true to them—that’s emotional safety” (para. 2). Safety emerged as a theme as participants talked about their attachment to their spouses. Participants also expressed that feelings of security and protection grew as they experienced open and honest communication within their marital relationships.

Maslow (1943), regards safety as a basic human need. He approached his understanding of adults’ need for safety by observing children and infants. Maslow (1943) offered the following observations of safety issues for adults: First Maslow (1943) saw that children are not inhibited in their reactions to potential threats as adults have been trained to do. Therefore, he contends that adults may not always show the appearance of fear. For most participants of this study, the ability to be open with their spouses about their fears helped to reduce the feelings of fear that may have arisen at different times during their relationships.

Next Maslow (1943) states that illness in an infant or child may threaten a child’s feeling of safety and may cause the child to develop fears and a need for reassurance that he or she will be fine. For adults, illness may feel like a loss of control in an individual’s world, which may lead to feelings of insecurity (Maslow, 1943). For the participants of this study, feelings of insecurity were calmed due to the knowledge that their spouse was there to care for them in their time of need. Knowing that there was someone who they could consistently rely on brought a sense of safety to each partner in the marriage.

Finally, Maslow (1943) saw “indication of the child’s need for safety in his preference for some kind of uninterrupted routine or rhythm. He seems to want a predictable, orderly world” (p. 376). The unpredictability of the dangers that individuals face in today’s world is cause for fear that leads to stress (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013). For the participants of this study, the need for safety was apparent for each individual. Some participants spoke of their relationship/marriage as a “safe haven”. One participant stated that “the connection is, at the end of the day, a safe place for both of us to be”. Consistency, respect and nurturance of the relationship coupled with the ability of each partner in the relationship to express their emotional needs helped to bring about a feeling of safety within the relationship for 11 of the 12 respondents.

#### **Theme 4. Marriage as union: Merging two into one.**

This theme pertains to the merging of the two individuals’ spirits into one. The process of merging together takes place as couples experience the freedom to be vulnerable with one’s spouse. From there, trust in each other grows and that creates an open door to spiritual connectedness, which leads to the feeling of safety that solidifies the relationship. As Participant A0204 states, “What’s meaningful is the ability to be fully ourselves.” “There is a sort of merging that happens. You keep your individual personality and your individual desires but you also have this second life as part of a unit...the US becomes every bit as important as the ME.”

#### **Participants’ Similarities**

All but one of the participants spoke of the “special connection” they had with their spouse. This connection for most, developed from knowing who they were as individuals prior to committing to their spouse. For some, if that self-knowing was not

fully realized, there was an internal emptiness that surfaced and needed to be realized within the individual, as the marriage progressed. Satisfying that need with support from the spouse helped to strengthen the marital bond.

Eleven of the 12 respondents discussed the importance of “being on the same page” with their spouse and being able to be vulnerable with that person. All but one of the participants spoke of or alluded to the feeling of safety that they experienced while in their relationship. This feeling of safety enhanced the feeling of having a “special connection.” All 12 participants shared that family and/or community made an impact on their decision to marry and on how their marriage was expressed in public. Lastly, all 12 participants seemed to believe that spirituality played a more significant role in their marriage than religiosity; although for some, religion had its place.

### **Participants’ Differences**

The most extreme difference came from participant B0307 who felt that because she was forced into the marriage, she had not truly experienced what she perceived marriage to be—“a committed relationship between two people where you are willing to make adjustments in your lifestyle in order to accommodate the person you’re living with.” This experience reveals that marriage must be the choice of both parties involved. Participant B0307 clearly stated that she had no connection to her husband of 30 years and that that relationship was established between her and his extended family. She stated, “I grew very very close to um, ya know, my ex’s aunts and uncles and their extended families. Umm, you know, it was an experience that I never had in my own family because I didn’t have any extended family.” Although she did not claim societal

pressure as an influence for staying in the marriage, it is hard to believe that society did not play a role on some level.

The one participant, who did not show these patterns in consistency, was Participant B0307 who stated that she “did not make the decision to marry” and that the decision had been made for her. Even though this marriage was not her choice, Participant B0307 expressed that divorce was not an option. “You know divorce was pretty much unheard of.” This resulted in her remaining in an unwanted marriage for 30 years. Consequently, the themes that emerged for the other 11 respondents, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5, did not emerge for Participant B0307. However, the inconsistency of this participant’s answers lent support to the comments made by the other participants. This showed me that the data for this study had reached saturation. The themes that emerged are described below.

### **The Research Questions**

For the past 20 to 25 years, America has been engaged in a battle over defining what marriage is and who deserves to benefit from it. To a certain extent, the battle over who benefits had been settled when the Supreme Court issued its 5-4 ruling in favor of marriage equality on June 26, 2015. However, the argument over what marriage is has yet to be settled. The marriage debate sparked several questions in me that led to the birth of this study. This section provides answers to the questions that guided this research.

- *How do people in long-term committed relationships, which they view as marriages, make meaning of their marriage?*

The answer to this question was uncovered when participants reflected on their lived experiences through what van Manen called his four lived-existentials (lived-time,

lived-space, lived-body, and lived-relation). All but one of the participants shared that the feelings, which were experienced between themselves and their spouses when emotions were shared, are what gave their marriages meaning. These feelings were revealed through sensations in their body (lived-body) and the quality of the communication over time (lived-relation). How they felt about who they were as a partner in the marriage also was identified as a key component when sharing insights about what made the marriage meaningful. Some of these sentiments are reflected in the following statements:

- “What’s meaningful is the ability to be fully ourselves. The ‘*us*’ becomes every bit as important as the ‘*me*’” (A0204).
- “It’s just the two of you; that special bond between the two of you that no one else can have” (B0107).
- “It felt comfortable; it felt right” (Participant C0103).
- “You have to originally feel comfortable with someone; love them” (D0205).
- “And then when I realized I was a person with needs and they may be different, it was a bit of a shock and also a stress on the relationship” (E0103).
- “It would be the faithfulness, the comradery” (Participant A0304).
- “It was euphoria! That feeling when I just always wanted to be with her and if I couldn’t, I just wanted to talk with her over the phone” (D0305).
- “You just know when you when you meet somebody that you can’t live without them. You always want to be talking to them, you want to tell them about your day. You just—it’s your other half” (B0707).

- “From the fall of 1987 when we fell in love to today, that love we have for one another has been totally consistent” (C0303).
- “I always felt that he was a part of my life, even when we weren’t together” (D0505).
- “I can’t rely on a piece of paper to tell me that she loves me. I mean, that’s all there is to it. I mean, it has to be a feeling between the two of us” (E0303).
- *How do homosexual and heterosexual adults experience commitment in their marriage?*

Commitment was revealed through the lived experience of attachment. As couples allowed themselves to be increasingly vulnerable with their spouses, by sharing their innermost fears and fantasies, thoughts and views, a deeper level of trust emerged, allowing both partners the security to continue to commit to the relationship. Looking back at Bowlby’s (1988) *Attachment Theory*, if strong bonds of attachment are formed with the caretaker early in a person’s life, these behaviors will play out throughout the lifespan of the individual. This, according to Bowlby (1988) is also true of weak early bonding attachments as well.

Eleven of the 12 respondents shared that they were raised by a male and a female parent. One respondent was raised by her mother and mother’s parents and one respondent’s mother had died when she was a teenager, leaving her father to care for and raise the family. The strength of parental/caretaker bonding varied in all respondents--from very close to somewhat distant. Respondents who conveyed a closeness with their parents shared that the closeness came as a result of watching how their parent’s related to one another in their marriages and how as individuals, they were treated within the

family unit. Of the respondents whose relationships with their parents/caretakers were somewhat distant, divorce had occurred at least once and in some cases multiple times. For one respondent, closeness in the relationship was virtually non-existent, even though they stayed in the relationship for thirty years. Of the respondents who indicated close relationships with their parents, there was no indication of divorce. Participant attachment bonds to parents/caretakers are reflected in the following statements:

- “...we felt like we would be upsetting parents and grandparents [if we just lived together]” (A0203)
- “They were strict conservative all the way. ...The man’s role is this. The woman’s role is this.” (B0107)
- “It [marriage] wasn’t drummed into us, so to speak but my father and mother would have had a 75 year marriage had my dad lived ‘til a few more months. ...You didn’t get married to get divorced.” (C0103)
- “Very close and ahh, one marriage ‘til death do us part kinda thing. Very committal, very trustworthy, very open. That’s how it [marriage] was defined to us.” (D0305)
- “My parents never discussed marriage with me.” (D0205)
- “I knew I had upset my parents by not going to college ...my father said to me, ‘no woman trusts her life to a man until she can support herself. ...he wouldn’t ok a wedding until I did that [attended a trade school] and got a job.” (E0103)

- “Marriage was never defined to me. I learned from what I saw, which wasn’t good. My father was a woman beater. My mother didn’t really go into marriage with me.” (A0304)
- “...my parents never really talked to me too much about marriage. ...Both of my parents were only children. ...Both of my parents were very committed to each other, so I definitely saw that as, you know, a role model to me, ...[but it was a] “pretty narrow view” [of marriage]. (B0307)
- “Married by the Justice of the Peace...lasted 51 years!” (B0707)
- “...shortly after coming out to myself, I came out to my parents and family and, ahh, at the end of the day, as much as people would be uncomfortable, it was clear to me that my family loved me no matter what.” (D0505)
- “My 70-year-old grandmother told my mother to sit down and to shut her mouth because this is the way I was born and this is how she needed to accept me or leave me alone!” (E0303)

All but one participant discussed, in one way or another, the experience of feeling safe with his or her most recent spouse. Commitment to the marriage was revealed through the continual exchange of care that couples gave to one another when they allowed themselves to be vulnerable with the other. This helped to strengthen the relationship and created a feeling of safety for both individuals.



- *How does the meaning that people apply to their marriages redefine marriage in 21<sup>st</sup> century America?*

Once seen as a simple agreement that joined two families together to strengthen their survival (and ultimately the survival of the species), marriage now serves as possibly one of the strongest platforms humanity has to grow and to learn about who we are as spiritual beings. Most of the participants discussed the shared spiritual connection that they felt with their spouses, and “the ability to be fully themselves” (Participant A0204) as they grew as individuals and simultaneously as a couple. The meaning that these individuals placed on marriage points toward a new awareness, whose focal point rests on who we are as spiritual beings and as spiritual beings living in our marital relationships in our bio-ecological environments.

Of the couples interviewed, which consisted of nine heterosexual people and three homosexual people, the word marriage undertook a more profound meaning than just a legal document that bound them together and provided federal benefits, even though the federal benefits were important. Marriage for these individuals regarded the day-to-day spiritual connection that they shared with their spouse that strengthened both their relationship and who they were as individuals in their homes and communities. These day-to-day spiritual connections were felt when performing tasks like making dinner, watching TV, calling to say hello during the work day, going to a sporting event or show, playing a card game, sharing the events of the day, bathing the baby, or solving a family problem together. The feelings were expressed by using words like “safe,” “at home,” “right,” and “loved.” All of the behaviors are relational and the spiritual connectedness occurs in how they related to one another.

- *Do the lived-experiences of same-sex couples, living in committed relationships, which they view as marriages, differ from those of their heterosexual counterparts?*

In general, the responses that the homosexual participants gave to all of the questions were similar to those given by their heterosexual counterparts. All of the responses reflected feelings of longing for the spouse, a “spiritual connection” between the two, consistent and mutual feelings of love for one another, a commitment to creating a home together, a desire to raise a family together, occasional arguments when they were not on the “same page,” and feeling “right” or “at home” with their same-sex spouse.

The only differences came when gay respondents discussed societal and familial support for their marriages. Two of the gay participants expressed feelings of alienation from some family members and all expressed some form of alienation from society in general. It is also important to note that all of the gay participants shared that there were also very supportive family and community members who helped to ease the pain of being stigmatized by societal and religious factions.

- *What do these experiences say about committed human relational experiences?*

Research findings showed that committed human relational experiences occurred on a spiritual level. The findings of this research continually pointed toward the spiritual connectedness that participants shared with their spouses throughout their marriages. Participants made statements such as, “When two people look at each other and without speaking a word, know what each other’s heart is saying; that’s a special communication” (B0107), and “There’s a connection that you have that, umm, you don’t have with

anybody else.... You just know what they're feeling; you know what they're going through. You don't even have to talk or be in the same room. You don't have to talk" (B0707), or "The primary thing was that we knew deep down in our hearts that we belonged to each other. That it was a spiritual thing that would last through eternity" as stated by participant C0303.

All but one respondent reported that being married was a feeling that occurred prior to the actual marriage ceremony. Respondents stated that marriage was a feeling that they had for their spouse, which could be experienced by anyone regardless of sexual orientation. All but one of the respondents talked about marriage as an expression of their love.

For some of the women, the feeling of being married came when the intended expressed shared feelings of commitment and for some, the feeling of being married came months into the courtship. Marriage was viewed as an intensely strong mutual feeling that both participants had for one another. Participant E0303 summarized in this way, "Marriage is to us, it's a state of being. I can't say that marriage is attached to one religion or another. ... Because it's all a part of everybody."

### **Themes Outside of the Perimeter**

During the interviewing portion of this study, some respondents made statements that stood out from what the majority had said in response to certain questions. Although there were not many, I believe that it is important to share the themes that lie outside of the perimeter.

1. *Choice*: Having the choice to be a partner in the marriage was driven home by Respondent B0307. As she talked about having the decision to marry taken

away from her, she shed light on the fact that certain relational experiences that are offered through marriage were also taken away. The relational experiences that were lost for her were, the experience of having a spiritual connection with her spouse and, most importantly, the feeling of safety that the other 11 respondents reflected on so meaningfully.

2. *Something Greater than Me*: Some of the participants expressed feeling that there was some “thing” or “being” that was greater than them, which orchestrated the joining of their union. Although Participant B0307 expressed confusion over spirituality and religion, she did state, “I think there is some being that puts us together. I mean, there has to be something outside of us.”
3. *Religious Control over Homosexuality*: Both of the gay male participants in this study shared that they were encouraged to pursue religious life rather than marriage. Although one felt that he experienced a true calling to religious life, the feeling was different for the other. Married life was discouraged for both of these men, primarily by the surrounding community. Conversely, the lesbian participant shared that her surrounding community, more often than her family, continually expressed the need for her to marry and have children. This pressure led her to marry a man and stay in what she referred to as “a loveless relationship” for 9½ years.

From the statements shared by the homosexual participants in this study, we see that the pressure to marry or not marry plays into gender stereotypes. It was more important for the lesbian woman, from the perspective of her religious family members and neighbors, to marry and have children thereby, fulfilling the role that society had set

for her—procreating and tending to the care of the children. It was expected and encouraged that the gay men enter into religious life, one can argue, to spare society from bearing witness to a man portraying what some believe to be the role of a woman.

Themes 1 and 2 in this section are reflective of the behaviors and thought processes of a society that is growing away from past beliefs about marriage and who we are as individuals in those marriages. Some members of society, however, continue to struggle with gay and gender stereotypes.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this inquiry was to shed light on the lived-experiences of some heterosexual and gay individuals who had been or were currently living in relationships they viewed as marriages. To do so, a Facebook page was created and used to solicit participation from heterosexual and homosexual adult individuals and couples who had been or were currently living in committed relationships that they experienced as a marriage.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was digitally audio-recorded. A journal was kept to record my thoughts, biases, and feelings as the process ensued. Detailed notes of the interviews were also taken and constantly referred back to throughout the process. I transcribed and analyzed each interview looking for patterns and themes to emerge by highlighting participants' key words and phrases based on the three theories used to guide the inquiry: attachment theory, bio-ecological theory, and four lived existentials. Data saturation was determined when no new information was being offered by the time I had interviewed the twelfth respondent. In addition, the

Literature Review (Chapter 2) also was used as a tool to garner insights to reflect on for the study.

At the conclusion of the 12<sup>th</sup> interview, it was clear that 11 of the 12 respondents were consistent in content. The one inconsistent respondent did not view or experience her 30-year relationship as a marriage. As stated, it was not her choice or decision to marry. Therefore, she did not experience what the other 11 respondents had experienced. It was clear to the researcher and to the researcher's dissertation committee chair that the data had reached saturation.

Research findings indicate that marriage continues to evolve as human beings continue to grow and develop. For the participants in this study, marriage is the spiritual connection that two people feel for each other as they grow together through life. The details and discussion for this data are found in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States guaranteed to all eligible citizens, regardless of sexual orientation, the right to marry under the Constitution of the United States. Despite this fact, some people continue to contend that marriage should be granted only to heterosexual couples and not to people of the same-sex (Raimey & Lepine, 2013; Schlesinger, 2016; Spring, 2016; Wlofson, 2004). Public discourse about marriage reveals that there are several definitions used to define and describe marriage in America (Steinmetz, 2013). Consequently, there appears to be some confusion in how society defines marriage, and how marriage is presented by the media.

For example, on January 20, 2004, President George W. Bush, in his *State of the Union Address* stated that “[a] strong America must value the institution of marriage. ... Our nation must defend the sanctity of marriage” (para. 61-62). Almost immediately after his speech, commercials were aired promoting the start of the fifth season of the popular reality TV show, *The Bachelor*, “in which a successful bachelor romances a number of beauties” (TV Guide.com, 2016, para. 1) for the purpose of eliminating female contestants until he finds the one for whom he will propose marriage (TV Guide.com, 2016). This show and many others like it appeared to trivialize marriage (Halberstam, 2004; Vranjican, 2014) while the fight for marriage equality was starting to heat up (Grofum, 2013; Jouvett, 2012).

There are impassioned arguments on both sides of the marriage equality debate (Liptak, 2015; Zorn, 2012). Anthropologist, Peter Wood (2011) suggests that people marry because marriage “means something beyond a private choice” (para. 8). I contend

that the “something” to which Wood (2011) refers, is what is meaningful to people about marriage and lives at the core of the passion heard in the arguments for both sides of the marriage equality debate. Uncovering what that underlying meaning is for some heterosexual and homosexual people is the basis of this study. In order to uncover the underlying meaning of marriage for the participants of this study, qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological research was conducted.

The purpose of this research is to interpret the lived experiences of some heterosexual and homosexual people who view their romantic intimate relationships as a marriage in order to uncover the underlying meaning of marriage for these participants. The research question, *how do homosexual and heterosexual people in committed relationships that they perceive as marriages make meaning of their marriages*, is best answered by using qualitative methodology. Qualitative methodology requires that the researcher immerse herself into some aspect of social life in an attempt to capture the meaning of the lived experience being examined, and convey it to others (McLeod, 2001).

Edmund Husserl (1913) founded the science of *phenomenology*, which “describes how one orients to lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p.4). Its aim is to examine an individual’s or group’s human experience of the world (lifeworld) as it is immediately experienced (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutics is the approach used to interpret and analyze phenomenological data (Kinsella, 2006). The interpretation of the data for this inquiry was done hermeneutically. The hermeneutic process of interpretation includes written, verbal and non-verbal communication. Hermeneutics also involves semiotics, or the process of learning how individuals understand or make meaning of life experiences.



Hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry was used to interpret the data in order to illuminate the underlying meaning that marriage holds for some people and also to stimulate new awareness about marriage.

There were three theories used to guide this inquiry: Adult Attachment theory, a continuation of Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth, 1972), Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Bioecological theory of Human Development, and van Manen's (1990) Four Lived Existentials. Adult attachment theory proposes that a basic component of human nature is the inclination human beings possess to make intimate emotional bonds to particular individuals throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1988; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Adult attachment theory was used to support the notion that "only certain close, face-to-face relationships function as relationships of attachment" (Weiss, 1982, p. 174). Adult attachment to identified significant others is more than the initial sexual attraction one may experience at the start of a romantic relationship. All but one of the participants shared that they experienced significant bonding with his or her spouse.

The next theory is Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) developed a system of multitiered ecological levels to illustrate human development. The system consists of five levels: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Each system contains social structures norms, roles, and rules that make an impact on the psychological development of the person or persons living within the environment or system. These environments are seen as the life course of the individual.

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) bioecological theory is useful when identifying risk factors and protective factors that make an impact on heterosexual and gay couples. A

risk factor is a condition, behavior or other factor that increases the chance of danger, while a protective factor increases the chance of one's protection in light of danger. (Patterson & D'Augelli, 2013). The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) (1996) was a United States federal law that defined marriage as the union of one man and one woman, for federal purposes. Prior to it being ruled unconstitutional, DOMA (1996) could have been viewed as a risk factor to gay couples because it denied them the right to marry and receive over one thousand federal protections that their heterosexual counterparts received. Furthermore, DOMA (1996) may have been viewed as a protective factor for heterosexual couples.

The third theory, van Manen's (1990) four lived existentials, provides a template to examine how these participants make meaning of their marriages. An existential is something that is "derived from experience or the experience of existence" (Vocabulary.com, n. d.). Van Manen's (1990) four existentials are lived-space, lived-time, lived-relation, and lived-body. Lived space refers to the space we feel, whether it is in terms of the feeling we generate at the announcement of a military dad coming home after a long tour of duty, or in terms of dimension, height or length. Lived-space reflects how we experience the space that we live in. Lived time refers to how we experience the passing of time. An example of lived-time is reflected in the statement, *time flies when you're having fun*. Lived relation refers to the relationships we maintain with others that allow us to go beyond the range or limits of who we are with that person. Finally, lived-body refers to the limiting information that our bodies tell us about our *selves* (van Manen, 1990). An example of lived-body is the feeling of one's heart skipping a beat at the thought of kissing a spouse.

The aim of this study was to reveal the underlying meaning of marriage for some people by exploring their lived experiences of marriage. Twelve participants agreed to answer questions pertaining to their marriages for this qualitative study. Data saturation was achieved by the completion of the 12<sup>th</sup> interview. It was determined by me and my dissertation Chair that data saturation had been made when no new information was revealed by the time the twelfth respondent had been interviewed. All but one participant appeared to have a generally positive experience of his or her marriage. Participant B0307 explained that she was forced into marriage and that even after 30 years together, felt that she “was not in the position” to describe marriage to another person. Her decision to stay in the marriage for as long as she did was mostly “because of [her] relationship with [her] in-laws.” More about participant B0307 appears later in this chapter. The following themes emerged after the data was analyzed. The themes and how they come together to reveal the underlying meaning of marriage for these participants is explained in the following sections.

### **Theme 1: The freedom to be vulnerable with one’s spouse**

Weiss (1982), who studied adult attachment theory, stated that “only certain close, face-to-face relationships function as relationships of attachment” (p. 174). Adult attachment, according to Weiss (1991) and Colin (1996), is experienced under the following conditions: when the partner is felt to be of “unique importance” (p. 294); both parties are able to function outside of the relationship despite threats to attachment; a sexual relationship exists; and loss of the spouse leads to grieving. These behaviors were apparent in 11 of the 12 respondents. They showed clear signs of attachment as they spoke of their experiences of being vulnerable with their spouses and the freedom that

lives within that vulnerability. Freedom to be vulnerable with one's spouse was valued as a necessary component of marriage and is reflected in the following participant statements.

While describing their definition of marriage and what was meaningful in their marriages, respondents illustrated their attachment to one another by describing a life where, as respondent A0204 stated, they are "able to admit fears, fantasies ...to be able to heal things through emotional support." While respondent D0205 stated, "I think marriage is a kind of communication that is spoken without anger and not afraid to talk about anything or—at any time, we can talk"; or as participant A0304 stated, "We're on the same page...What we have is one. I can speak to her [and] she can speak to me." And finally, respondent E0303 stated of her lesbian relationship, "The most meaningful thing is communication because as long as we both talk to each other, then everything else, even if we're mad at each other, umm, as long as we're talking to each other, then everything else will fall into place."

The feeling of vulnerability among these participants and their marriage partners was calmed with open, honest, and clear communication. This vulnerability, when handled with emotional support, love, and caring, created a bond of trust that helped both partners nurture each other and the marriage. When confronted with the *vulnerability state* in the other, the nurturance of that spouse indicated to that spouse that she or he was of "unique importance" (Weiss, 1982, p. 294) in the relationship. Consequently, partners felt trust and support for one another, which eliminated any thought of an outside threat to the marriage, and the sexual relationship was free for exploration.

## **Theme 2: Communication Beyond Words: Developing the “Spiritual Connection”**

Van Manen’s four existentials: lived-relation, lived-space, lived-time and lived-body were used as a guide to interpret respondents’ reflections of the spiritual connectedness they had with their spouses. Van Manen’s (1990) four existentials helped to create a structure that supported how these married individuals and couples made meaning of their relationships.

*Lived-space* (spatiality) refers to how one feels in the space in which he or she is living. Although most of the participants shared their love for their spouses, all also shared a commonality with the feeling of struggle and difficulty when initially sharing space with their spouse. Most of these discussions focused on the lack of adequate space that many couples endured when they first started out together. This lack of space created an emotional and physical closeness for the couple that was often challenged by extended family members.

Participant D0204 described the struggles of sharing space during his first marriage. He said,

And we used to live in a two bedroom mobile. Then her daughter and her husband moved in. Then her other daughter came in and her first daughter’s youngest son moved in. So we had five or six people move into a two-bedroom home. And I was treated like I was a guest in my own house.

Participant E0103 shared similar struggles when she described moving into her husband’s parent’s home:

We were trying to save money, and you know it wasn’t easy at that time. We had two kids and we wanted to buy our own house. So they had a two-family home

and suggested that we live upstairs. So we moved in and my mother-in-law, first of all, wouldn't let me touch the washing machine. She had to do all the wash, which you know at this stage in my life wasn't such a bad thing, but as a young bride, I didn't like that. But anyway, the invasion on our privacy by her, not my father-in-law. I mean she had to know everything about everything, and when we weren't there, she snuck into our apartment. And then I couldn't walk past her door with the two kids, and she wouldn't have some comment on, ah, what I was doing or how I dressed them or whatever. So finally ... I said, "You have two choices, a wife in Creedmoor (that's a mental hospital) or we buy a house."

Because they were resigned to the fact that this was the person with whom they had chosen to live, many participants considered the struggle of living together to be normal or expected. Regardless of any hardship that may have been present at the time, these individuals were at the time, in the process of developing the trust that would sustain their marriages.

*Lived-relation* (relationality or communality) refers to the relationship experienced with the spouse within the interpersonal shared space. All but one respondent offered positive responses when discussing how she related to her spouse in maintaining their marital relationship. Respondents' statements revealed that strong relationships happen through the senses. When spouses touch, offer a special look, a soft kiss, the lilt in the sound of the loved one's voice, and even the scent of the spouse's pheromones are all ingredients to growing a marriage. The lived-experience of marriage happens through the senses and open communication and the willingness to be vulnerable

with one's spouse helps to maintain the marriage. Participant D0505 shared his lived-experience of relating intimately with his husband for the first time:

We just kind of hung out. We spent a lot of time together and uh, we were ahh, we were in my room, and we were talking and we just spent the entire night talking to one another, and looking at one another, and smiling at one another, and we were just kind of holding one another and nothing happened sexually, but it felt so at home, and it also felt like, "Oh, this could be dangerous."

All of the gay participants shared the common theme of having improved and strengthened familial relationships once they "came out" and shared their homosexuality with some family members. Participant E0303 stated,

But now that I've gotten older, and I actually came out to my family, I've had a lot of umm, less criticism than I expected.... My 70-year-old grandmother told my mother to sit down and to shut her mouth because this is the way I was born, and this is how she needed to accept me or leave me alone!

*Lived-time* (temporality) refers to how the individual experiences the passing of time. All of the participants expressed their lived experience of time during their marriages. There was a commonality in the responses across all 12 respondents with regard to how slowly time would seem to pass when they were struggling with a problem and how quickly it seemed to go when problems were at a minimum.

As human beings, we experience the other through our bodies and this is recalled through our consciousness (Rodemeyer, 2006). Van Manen's (1990) term for this experience is *lived-body* or corporeality. Corporal experiences can be given meaning through the lived-experience of the attraction that one spouse feels for another.

According to Rodemeyer (2006), “My own experience of my body includes a link to my consciousness, and this is essential to my living, bodily experience” (p. 4). The ability to be vulnerable with and have the freedom to say anything to one’s spouse without fear of the loss of the attached figure leads to the feeling of a special trust or bond with the other. This in turn, creates a higher level of communication between the two. Participant D0205 stated, “We share anything we can, and it’s a great feeling!” This heightened state of communication was viewed as a “spiritual connection” by most of the participants. According to participant C0303, “It was a spiritual thing that would last through eternity. That we would never doubt it or question it.” Participant B0707 explained the connection in this way:

There is a connection that you have, umm, you don’t have with anybody else.  
...You just know what they’re feeling. You know what they’re going through.  
You don’t even have to talk. You can just read their expressions, just—you just know them. You know what they’re going to say. You know how they’re going to react to things.

Finally, participant D0505 stated,

I always felt that he was a part of my life even when we weren’t together. ...I actually entered another relationship with another guy, you know? We lived together, and it had never, it was never the right thing, you know? It was a very good friendship and, but it was never, it was never that sense that this is where I am meant to be.

### **Theme 3: Safety**

The spiritual connection allows a sense or feeling of safety for both partners in the marriage. Participant D0505 stated,



And when we get to the root of it, the things that we argue about, and those arguments occur when we are not on the same page. Umm, and it's not out of anger or meanness or jealousy or anything like that. It's like a desire for, you know, this connection that, you know, obviously is never going to be perfect, umm, but a connection that is, at the end of the day, a safe place for both of us to be. I think safety and I think one of the things that we encourage for one another is to be one another's advocate.

All but one of the respondents reported feeling safe in their most recent marriage. The inability to feel safe occurred because there was no trust or caring established from the outset of the marriage. This feeling of safety within the union appears to be highly significant, as it is what leads to sustainability in the union and nurturance of the institution, which some believe leads to security and survival of the species.

#### **Theme 4: Marriage as Union: Merging Two into One**

Several of the participants discussed the importance of maintaining their individuality while becoming a partner in the marriage. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory of human development is used here to examine how these participants navigated their community and familial supports to strengthen the development of their marriages while maintaining their own individuality. Being able to maintain one's individuality was more of an issue for the heterosexual women than the heterosexual men or any of the gay respondents.

Bronfenbrenner (1994) developed five ecological levels or systems, (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) to illustrate how human beings develop through interactions within these systems. He viewed the ecological environment as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of

Russian dolls” (p. 39). Bronfenbrenner (2005) stated that the relationship between the individual and the ecological systems that they inhabit “constitutes the driving force of human development” (p. xix).

The *microsystem* is the immediate setting in which, in this case, the couple or married individual is behaving at any given moment. An example of a microsystem would be a family, school, social group, and/or work environment. A *mesosystem* is a system of two or more microsystems. As to be expected, family and community play a pivotal role, not only with regard to a person’s decision to marry but more so after the wedding has taken place. Several heterosexual respondents discussed the roles that were expected of them once they were married.

Participant A0204 stated,

when we got married...there were still umm, a rather firm gender role. Ahh, there were more women in the workplace, but it was still kind of understood that, you know, he was more responsible for the economic health of our family, and I was more responsible for the home front.

While sharing how his family influenced his ideas about marriage, participant B0107 stated,

They were very strict conservative all the way. Ahh, traditional right down to the bone; you name it! ...The man’s role is this. The woman’s role is this. The man always does these things. The woman always does these things.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) noted that “of equal importance are connections between other persons present in the setting, the nature of these links, and the direct influence on the developing person through their effect on those who deal with him at first hand” (p.

7). Several heterosexual women commented on the impact that their mothers-in-law had on their marriages.

Participant E0103 shared the following:

Ahh, he was caught in the middle. ...He'd say, "But she's my mother, and she means well." I just don't think she has to know everything. ...They wouldn't even give us our own mailbox. She saw my mail, commented on it, you know. It was difficult.

Familial and communal influences on heterosexual people versus homosexual people showed a stark contrast in some situations. Although some of the in-laws were seen to be invasive, according to the gay participants, the influence felt by two of the three homosexual participants in this study appeared to be more a feeling of alienation and possibly loss. Participant E0303 illustrated how communal and familial interactions can control the beliefs and behaviors of the individual:

It didn't come directly from my family. It came from outsiders. And when you're told from outsiders that you need to be married, and you need to have children, and you need to have a home and things of that nature, whether they are realistic or not, that was there. ...My mom and stepdad would say things like, "Well, we don't really know anybody who's gay, but we don't want to have anybody in my family who is gay."

For participant D0505, the message that marriage may not be an option was conveyed through similar communal and familial interactions. He stated,

I used to think how much fun it will be when I am able to get married. And as I grew older and as I questioned my own sexuality, there was a period of time when

I finally felt alienated by that because I didn't think that that was something that would be a part of who I am and where my life is.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated, "The aspects of the environment that are most powerful in shaping the course of psychological growth are overwhelmingly those that have meaning to the person in a given situation" (p. 22). The pressure to get married from outside influences caused Participant E0303 to marry a man even though she is a lesbian. She has since divorced him and is "happily married" to her wife of six years. Likewise, Participant D0505 recently celebrated the one-year anniversary of the federal recognition of his 21-year marriage.

For Participants E0303 and D0505, these changes in behavior are most likely due to the changes in attitude across the nation leading up to the 2015 Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality and creates a great segue into the next system that couples and individuals are affected by—the exosystem. The exosystem is described as "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but which events occur that affect, or are affected by what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25).

All of the gay people in this study showed that they were directly affected by the Supreme Court rulings that had been in place at the time of the interviews. Both gay men had gotten married under the eyes of their local government, in addition to the previous private ceremony they had, and the one lesbian stated that she and her wife had been married in another state, but once moved to their current state, their marital union was not recognized, forcing them to apply for civil union status. The changes that they made in their personal lives were indicative of changes that Bronfenbrenner (1979) referred to as

*ecological transitions*, or changes that occur “whenever a person’s position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both” (p. 26). These ecological transitions are also viewed as “both a consequence and an instigator of the developmental process” (p. 27). The process of give and take between the married individual, couple, and environment is what Bronfenbrenner referred to as the “ecology of human development” (p. 103).

The other social issues that respondents discussed when commenting on familial and communal influences concerned education, religion, divorce, and work. Nine of the 12 respondents discussed the importance of having an education and the impact education had on their married life. For women especially, education and working were important avenues to help them balance themselves and their relationships. One respondent put it this way: “I lost my individuality in losing myself in my marriage. ...I always felt incomplete, and so I went back to college.”

All of the respondents appeared to believe in a Christian God; however, several seemed to struggle or showed some confusion over following Christian dogma as it pertains to gay people marrying and the issue of divorce. Those respondents who commented seemed to believe that everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, has the right to experience marriage. According to Participant D0707,

You walk by how many people in the world? You sit by how many people in the world? You meet how many people in the world...why would I be so special?

There’s just no: you get it, you don’t. You know? Anybody has the opportunity.

Regarding divorce, most appeared to believe that the decision to divorce in contemporary society is taken too freely. According to Participant D0305,

Well, I bought into that whole thing, you know, married until death. ...One marriage until death do us part kind of thing. Umm, very committal, very trustworthy, very open. ...That's how we took it, and that's how we've lived it over the years. ...Society now, I don't think they perceive marriage as a total commitment.

While participant B0707 stated, "Divorce wasn't an option. You just worked through them [problems] and that's the way we handled our marriage, you know?"

Obviously, divorce has not been an issue for the gay people in this study as it has been for the heterosexual participants. However, as stated earlier, Participant E0303, a lesbian who did divorce, stated that the separation occurred because "it was a loveless relationship." She went on to explain that although she loves her children, the product of that marriage, she should never have married her former husband knowing that she was a lesbian. Her emotional growth led her to her current relationship with a woman and is reflective of how these participants changed over the duration of their marriages.

In the chronosystem, we see change or consistency over time in the characteristics of these married individuals as well as in the environments in which they live. All 12 participants showed consistency in the growth of their relationships regardless of whether they viewed them as good or bad. More importantly, participants were able to share their emotional growth over time.

As the national climate changed over time, those who experienced its impact, whether directly or indirectly, appeared to move along with it. The struggle for marriage equality could have been viewed in one aspect as a macrosystem, which is defined as "consistencies in the form and content of lower-ordered systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979,

p. 26) that is, the micro, meso, and exo-systems of gay culture were trying to transition, change, or merge with the macrosystem of heterosexual or “straight” culture. Fortunately, the macrosystem of heterosexual culture reciprocated. For Bronfenbrenner, human development is this movement. It is the individual’s or couples’ growth as they “acquire a more extended differentiated and valid conception of the ecological environment” (p. 27). The individual or couple becomes “motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties of, sustain, or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content” (p. 27). In other words, marriage equality for same-sex couples is the manifestation of human growth and development.

### **Participant B0307**

Participant B0307’s responses in this study were invaluable, even though she admitted feeling at times as if she had nothing to contribute. I have decided not to reveal the intimate details of her life in order to maintain her anonymity. However, her story revealed how enormous the impact is that family and society have on our daily lives and how the actions of one person can have a ripple effect on others. Through her honest conversation about her life and “marriage”, Participant B0307 illustrated and illuminated the fact that marriage is more than a wedding ceremony and a legal document. She stated,

I think *like* has more to do with marriage. If you don’t like the person you’re in a relationship with, you’re in big trouble. You can, I think you can be in love with somebody and then find out that you don’t particularly like them; who they are and what they are.

The respondent shared that she had divorced her ex-husband after 30 years together. But throughout those 30 years, she admits that the communication between her, her ex-husband, and the people closest to her was lacking.

Well, you know, through my marriage, umm, and even in my relationship today, and probably just in my whole life, I am very good at hiding things. ...I never ran to my parents and my family and said, “Oh my god, ... my marriage is horrible and ... I’m being emotionally abused, and ... he’s a raging alcoholic, and I can’t take it anymore.” ...I didn’t disclose that to people, that that was going on in my life.

Although Participant B0307 has been in a different relationship for the past 10 years, she admitted that some of the same problems she had in her former relationship are starting to surface. Her experiences reveal certain truths about what does not make a marriage. Those truths are, first and foremost, that marriage in America is not a relationship that can be decided *for you* or forced upon you by someone else. There are several cultures that once practiced or continue to practice the tradition of *arranged marriage*,

Marriages that begin with a match-making process in which the spouse are chosen for one another by third parties to the marriage, such as parents or elder relatives.

One spouse migrates to join the other in his or her country of residence. (Enright, 2009, p. 331)

Arranged marriages should not be confused with *forced marriage*: “a marriage in which at least one of the spouses, whether by reason of physical, emotional or psychological pressure, did not give consent to be married” (Enright, 2009, p. 331).



Marriage does not concern itself with the betterment of only one person in the relationship. Marriage cannot exist in selfishness, lies, and deceit. Because marriage requires at least two people, it cannot survive without honest communication. Marriage is not distrust, nor is it controlling or manipulative. Finally, marriage does not foster insecurity because, for it to do so, one would not be relating to one's spouse, and if one is not relating, then one has disconnected.

### **Summary of the Themes**

Monogamous marriage is the preferred and most popular form of marriage in the United States today (Mooney, Knox, & Schacht, 2013; Williams & Abdullah, 2015). However, monogamous marriage between two women or two men, commonly referred to as same-sex marriage, has been a source of argument and debate for over two decades (Wolfson, 2004). In May 1993, three same-sex couples sued the state of Hawaii for marriage licenses (*Baehr v. Lewin*, (1993), later *Baehr v. Miike* (1996). Believing that they might be in jeopardy of sexual discrimination, the Hawaii Supreme Court sent the case back to the trial court for a new hearing.

In response to the lawsuit, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) (1996) was introduced to state legislatures and Congress by political forces. The Act, which defined marriage as between "only one man and one woman as husband and wife" (DOMA, 1996, para. 1), and which prohibited the recognition of marriages between homosexual couples on the federal level, was signed into law by President Clinton on September 21, 1996. Nineteen years later, as a result of a clearer understanding and interpretation of the Constitution, the Supreme Court determined that DOMA was unconstitutional, thus giving same-sex couples equal rights to marry across all 50 states.

It became apparent to me while listening to both sides of the marriage equality argument that there were several different definitions of marriage being put forth by politicians, religious leaders, and laymen. “Marriage can refer to a legal contract and civil status, a religious rite and a social practice, all of which vary by legal jurisdiction, religious doctrine and culture” (Brake, 2012, para. 1). The multitude of definitions that there are for marriage made it difficult to understand what marriage is and consequently made the arguments about marriage ineffectual. In addition, public discourse about marriage reaffirmed my conclusion that society in general is confused when it comes to defining what marriage *is*.

The purpose of this qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study was to reveal the underlying meaning of marriage by examining and interpreting what homosexual or heterosexual participants shared about their lived-experiences of their relationships that they viewed as marriages. To obtain an organic and meaningful look into these relationships, I opened participation for this study to heterosexual and homosexual people across the United States and made the decision not to discuss the federal benefits that would have been awarded to only some people at the time of this research. After it was apparent that no new information was forthcoming, I concluded along with my dissertation chair that data saturation had been achieved. I concluded the interviews. I focused on the themes that emerged after analyzing the data and the questions used to guide the inquiry. In the end, I uncovered the following about what marriage is in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, for some individuals.

The participants of this study made meaning of their marriages through the quality of the communication they shared with their spouses. That communication came in many

forms, through open and honest conversation, the sense of touch, a smile, arguing fairly, or even as one couple shared, through a “growl and a laugh.” The level of honesty and openness in the communication calmed the level of vulnerability that each spouse felt with the other. The nurturance that one spouse bestowed on the other during times when he or she was in the vulnerable state, determined the level of trust that each one had in the other and that cycled back to both to reinforce and strengthen the communication, or to weaken it. In other words, the higher the level of communication over time, the stronger the trust and the more the individual felt that he or she could be vulnerable with his or her spouse. In turn, the level of trust and safety felt by each partner in the relationship was strengthened.

One’s sexual orientation made no impact on how gay or heterosexual couples and individuals communicated or related to one another. Moreover, no observations were made of any differences in the lived-relational experiences of same-sex couples and individuals and their heterosexual counterparts. All of the participants conveyed that it was the deeper, spiritual part of them that either connected with or did not connect with the spiritual part of their partner. It was the day-to-day nurturance of the spiritual connection and the knowledge that each individual was an advocate for his or her spouse within the larger community that defined the underlying meaning of marriage. All of these couples, heterosexual and gay, sought marriage because societal and familial recognition and support of their spiritual connectedness allowed the individual’s spirit to grow. In addition, individuals, specifically the women in this study, shared the importance of their own growth as spiritual beings.

Marriage has emerged into a special and unique spiritual attachment that occurs, in the case of this study, between two people who feel a certain emotional and sexual pull toward one another. The lived experience of marriage lives within the individual's senses, and as a result of the pull they feel toward one another, open and honest communication with each other, in and outside of the community in which they live, must occur. That communication allows the partners to grow closer through the freedom of knowing that they can be vulnerable with one another without the fear of losing the relationship. Honest and open communication is reinforced through each individual's self-awareness and nurturance of his or her personal and emotional needs. It is of primary importance that both individuals tend to their individual needs while supporting the needs of the other. This support is reciprocal. The vulnerability that they share together leads to a heightened sense of trust, which, in turn, creates a safe haven for both parties, and that safe haven or feeling of safety is, as one participant declared, is "a state of being."

The inner and outer community plays a pivotal role in the lives of the couple. The inner community, which consists of extended family members and relatives, neighbors, workplace colleagues, schools, churches and so on, can help to support or add stress to the new couple's lives. As indicated earlier, one participant's mother-in-law became so invasive that the participant felt the stress of it would one day send her to a mental institution. Similarly, the outer community, which consists of our local and city government agencies, state and federal agencies, as well as the global community, can either lend support to or hinder the growth of the couple.

This is the case that is presented here and the reason why this study is of great importance to not just the national community but to the global community. Members of

the federal government once tried to define the marriage relationship by attributing to it characteristics that could only be celebrated by one portion of the larger community. And even though a great wrong was corrected by the overturning of the Defense of Marriage Act (1996), and by making marriage equality the national standard, there are still very powerful factions of society that continue to try to force their beliefs on others without attempting to further their understanding of marriage by exploring the relationship itself. What we are all fighting for is the liberty to express our rights and freedoms that were handed to us by our forefathers. That is, the right and the freedom to express openly who we are with the one we love, inside and outside of our neighborhoods and communities.

In the United States of America, we tend to believe that everyone is innocent until proven guilty. We believe in the freedom of speech and the right for each citizen to pursue life, liberty, and happiness, which according to the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) are “inalienable rights” afforded to all human beings by their Creator. The fight for marriage equality is a struggle for the civil rights set forth by our forefathers (Wolfson, 2004). Now that marriage equality has been accomplished, the struggle to maintain it and continue educating the minds of those who would choose to marginalize others is what is at stake. Finally, this research highlights and reiterates the fact that human beings are always growing and changing and, therefore, simply cannot be forced into being something that they are not.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Results from this study have prompted ideas for further research. First, this study focused its attention on monogamous marital relationships. An investigation of the relationality of members of other forms of marriage (polygamy, group marriages) would

help to determine if they experience similar or different findings of this study and what those implications would mean to society at large. Some questions generated from this inquiry are:

1. How does the American way of life affect attachment in married couples who have emigrated from other countries?
2. What percentage of couples in America divorced due to later findings that one or both members are homosexual?
3. What impact will the passing of marriage equality play on the marriage/divorce rate?
4. What impact will the passing of marriage equality make on how people perceive Christian dogma?

Several participants in this study expressed that they had stayed in former relationships for several years, while never having felt or experienced the emotions they feel in their current relationships. An investigation into marital sustainability and self-esteem would be advantageous for those who practice in the field of marriage and family and couples counseling. A probe into how and why couples feel the need to remain in unfulfilling marriages would also bring understanding and clarity to this complex relationship. A probing question into this topic might be:

*What impact does a person's mental health have on the decision to stay in one's marriage?*

Finally, it would be advantageous if this research were conducted in the global community, thereby creating an understanding of marital relatedness as it pertains to marriages in other cultures, for example, as in cultures that prefer arranged marriages. An

examination of marriage across continents could only help to move humanity forward.

Probing questions for this might be:

1. How do cultures outside of the United States make meaning of their marriages?
2. What are the similarities and differences in the experiences of marriages in various cultures around the world?
3. How do these similarities and differences affect various cultural society's mental health?

### **Implications for the Counseling Profession**

June 26, 2016 marked the first year anniversary of marriage equality for gay couples across the United States. Although this is an achievement to be celebrated for gay people and their allies, it is clear that the struggles that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people face continue throughout society. The recent massacre in an Orlando, Florida nightclub of 49 gay people and allies, which was “the worst mass shooting in U.S. history” (Barry, 2016), is proof of the hatred that is targeted toward gay people. The controversial law, House Bill 2 (HB2), “which requires transgender people to use bathrooms that correspond to the gender on their birth certificate” (Valencia, 2016) also is indicative of the steady stream of misunderstanding that can lead to violence against the transgender community.

Counselors have the opportunity to play a pivotal role in the lives of all people affected by these types of tragedies and issues. Clinical mental health counselors, marriage and family counselors, rehabilitation, and school counselors specifically, may find themselves experiencing an increase in LGBT clientele due to the increased

acceptance of LGBT people nationwide. More LGBT people may seek counseling to help them manage issues pertaining to getting married as a “non-traditional” couple who may want to raise a family. Counselors will be challenged to help clients deal with issues such as bullying, shame, self-esteem, physical violence, and drug and alcohol related addictions.

As more same-sex couples marry, issues will surface that will be unique to gay couples. One such issue pertains to where each partner is in the coming out process (Meyer, 2015). In many gay relationships, couples learn that they are in different stages of the coming out process (Meyer, 2015). The impending marriage can lead to stress on one or both spouses due to the fact that family members may have to be informed. In some cases, coming out as gay immediately precedes the announcement to marry. Counselors can help couples and families navigate through these issues by helping couples “determine what marriage—and the couple’s level of being “out”—will mean for them at work and as a family” (Meyers, 2015).

Other struggles might arise if the couple decides to start a family either through adoptive means or through the unification of their two separate families. Many gay people have biological children for various reasons. Dealing with a child who may have at one time been a member of a traditional family but is no longer, can lead to issues of anger and betrayal for the child. In addition, same-sex couples who try to adopt may need help managing the emotional and financial stresses that go along with the adoption process.

Counselors also must be aware of the racial issues that may occur when intercultural same-sex people become coupled. If one or both partners is a member of a



minority culture "...the prejudice they experience is often amplified" (Meyer, 2015). According to Meyer (2015), "They become potential targets of discrimination not only because of their ethnic or racial identities but also because of their sexual or gender identities" (p. 32). Counselors must try to understand the experience of his or her culturally diverse client and seek to understand the various identities one client may possess. In this way, counselors can help clients to strengthen their resiliency during challenging times. Finally, as is always the case for counselors in an ever changing and diverse world, counselors must continually *self-evaluate*. (Meyer, 2015). Counselors are human beings with biases. Constant supervision and self-care are important not only to the wellbeing of the counselor, but to the client.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the lived-experiences of some heterosexual and homosexual individuals and couples' long-term relationships that they viewed as marriages. The purpose of conducting such research was to illustrate how some people make meaning of their marital relationships and to reveal the underlying meaning of marriage that appears to allude most Americans. In addition, understanding how individuals make meaning of their marital relationships creates room for a more refined and succinct definition of marriage.

The findings of this study underscore the fact that for these 12 participants, marriage was more than a legal contract that can be attained between only a man and a woman. The findings suggest that marriage is a spiritual connection, which begins within the spirit of the individual. The spiritual connection includes and surpasses one's sexual orientation. This study provided an opportunity for formerly and currently married

American citizens to share their insights and lived-experiences of marriage. An analysis of the four themes that emerged from the data revealed that marriage in 21<sup>st</sup> century United States has transcended the legal tangible written contract that some believe should only be granted to one man and one woman and has become the union of two spirits uniting through vulnerability, trust, and love, thereby creating a bond of safety from which both parties continue to grow as individuals and as a couple. The underlying meaning of marriage is the vibration that two individuals feel when they experience the union.

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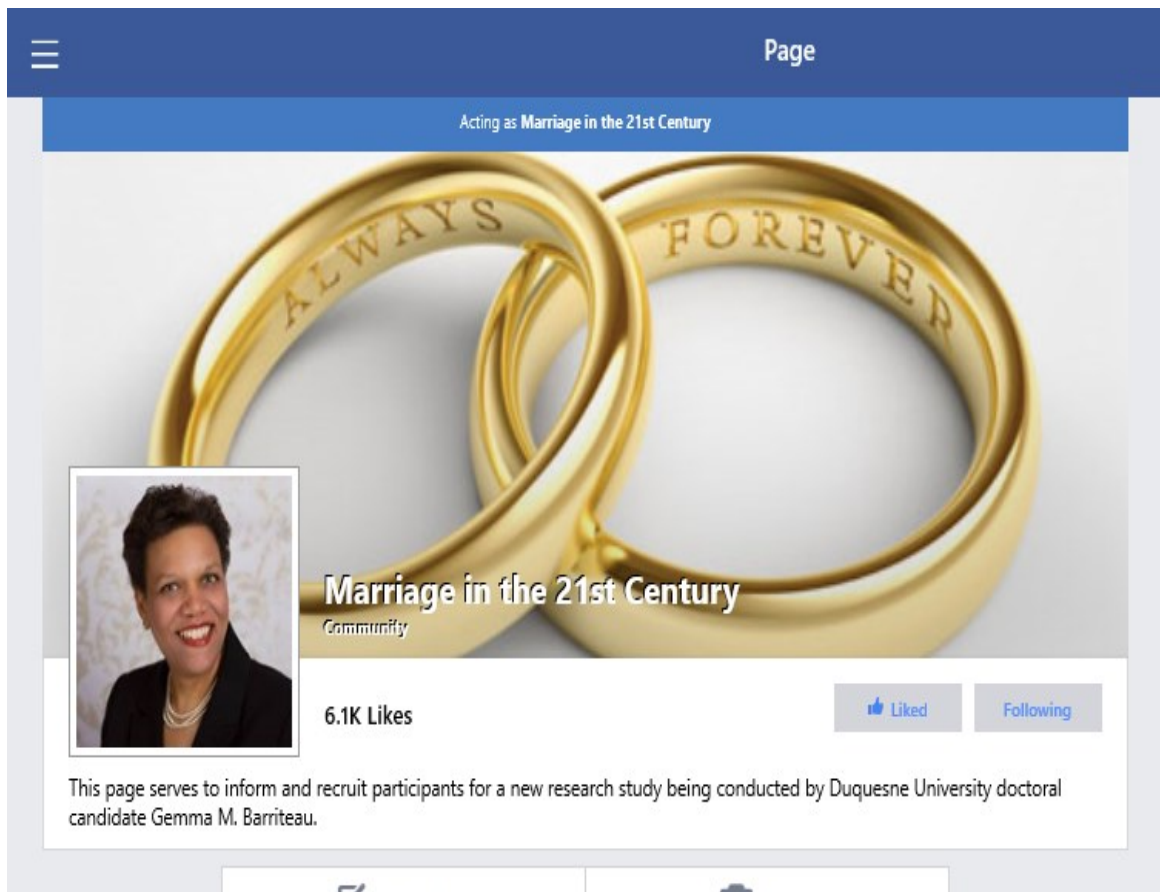
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## APPENDIX A

### FACEBOOK SOLICITATION FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY





## Marriage in the 21st Century

August 29, 2014 · Edited ·

### NOTICE

Lived Experiences of Marriage in the 21st Century: A Hermeneutic Inquiry into Equity

Welcome to this exciting new research project conducted by Duquesne University doctoral candidate, Gemma M. Barriteau, M.S.Ed., NCC, LMHC. This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Counseling at Duquesne University. The research entitled Lived Experiences of Marriage in the 21st Century: a Hermeneutic Inquiry into Equity seeks to investigate the meaning of the marriage relationship through an examination of the organic lived-experiences of persons who have been in long-term committed relationships for thirty years or more, regardless of sexual orientation.

This page serves solely as a conduit between the researcher and possible participants. The project is open to all persons across the United States who self-identify as a heterosexual or homosexual person who has been in a long-term committed relationship (also known as marriage) with one spouse. Participants must speak standard American English fluently and be willing to share their experiences of marriage through tape recorded telephone OR face-to-face interviews. Please contact Gemma M. Barriteau, at ... for further information.



## **APPENDIX B**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my study. There will be approximately 17 questions. You are not obligated to answer any of the questions that you are not comfortable with. As a reminder, you will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin? Let's start.

#### **Demographics:**

1. What is your sexual orientation?
2. Gender?
3. Age?
4. Cultural background?
5. Current marital status?
6. What state do you currently live in?
7. How many years have you been married or in a committed relationship with your spouse?

#### **Interview Questions:**

1. What is your definition of marriage?
2. How did society define marriage to you? How did your family define marriage to you? Were there any differences? Please explain.
3. Please describe what is or was meaningful to you in your marriage?

4. Some of the potential respondents asked me to omit the 30-year time requirement.  
As a result of this change, I would like to know how you have experienced time spent with your spouse over the years.
5. How would you describe marriage to a person from another planet who knew nothing about this type of relationship?
6. Please describe the feelings you experienced when you knew that you wanted to commit yourself to your spouse.
7. Does love have anything to do with marriage?
8. At what point in your relationship did you feel married to your spouse?
9. What do you believe makes a marriage work?
10. Does the word marriage hold any significant religious or spiritual meaning for you? Please explain.
11. What expectations or pressures, if any, did you experience that played a part in your decision to marry?
12. Have you experienced a divorce? Please describe what changed in the relationship.
13. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

## APPENDIX C

### DOMA TEXT

PUBLIC LAW 104-199—SEPT. 21, 1996

110 STAT. 2419

Public Law 104-199  
104th Congress

#### An Act

To define and protect the institution of marriage.

Sept. 21, 1996  
[H.R. 3396]

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

#### SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the “Defense of Marriage Act”.

Defense of  
Marriage Act.  
1 USC 1 note.

#### SEC. 2. POWERS RESERVED TO THE STATES.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 115 of title 28, United States Code, is amended by adding after section 1738B the following:

##### “§ 1738C. Certain acts, records, and proceedings and the effect thereof

“No State, territory, or possession of the United States, or Indian tribe, shall be required to give effect to any public act, record, or judicial proceeding of any other State, territory, possession, or tribe respecting a relationship between persons of the same sex that is treated as a marriage under the laws of such other State, territory, possession, or tribe, or a right or claim arising from such relationship.”

(b) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.—The table of sections at the beginning of chapter 115 of title 28, United States Code, is amended by inserting after the item relating to section 1738B the following new item:

“1738C. Certain acts, records, and proceedings and the effect thereof.”

#### SEC. 3. DEFINITION OF MARRIAGE.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 1 of title 1, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following:

##### “§ 7. Definition of ‘marriage’ and ‘spouse’

“In determining the meaning of any Act of Congress, or of any ruling, regulation, or interpretation of the various administrative bureaus and agencies of the United States, the word ‘marriage’ means only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word ‘spouse’ refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife.”

## **APPENDIX D**

### **PRESIDENT'S STATEMENT ON DOMA**

Statement by President Bill Clinton

On Friday, September 20, prior to signing the Defense of Marriage Act, President Clinton released the following statement:

Throughout my life I have strenuously opposed discrimination of any kind, including discrimination against gay and lesbian Americans. I am signing into law H.R. 3396, a bill relating to same-gender marriage, but it is important to note what this legislation does and does not do.

I have long opposed governmental recognition of same-gender marriages and this legislation is consistent with that position. The Act confirms the right of each state to determine its own policy with respect to same gender marriage and clarifies for purposes of federal law the operative meaning of the terms "marriage" and "spouse."

This legislation does not reach beyond those two provisions. It has no effect on any current federal, state or local anti-discrimination law and does not constrain the right of Congress or any state or locality to enact anti-discrimination laws. I therefore would take this opportunity to urge Congress to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, an act which would extend employment discrimination protections to gays and lesbians in the workplace. This year the Senate considered this legislation contemporaneously with the Act I sign today and failed to pass it by a single vote. I hope that in its next Session Congress will pass it expeditiously.

I also want to make clear to all that the enactment of this legislation should not, despite the fierce and at times divisive rhetoric surrounding it, be understood to provide an excuse for discrimination, violence or intimidation against any person on the basis of sexual orientation. Discrimination, violence and intimidation for that reason, as well as others, violate the principle of equal protection under the law and have no place in American society.

## APPENDIX E

### STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS TO THE 108TH CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION

United States Capitol

January 20, 2004

Excerpt:

We are living in a time of great change — in our world, in our economy, in science and medicine. Yet some things endure courage and compassion, reverence and integrity, respect for differences of faith and race. The values we try to live by never change. And they are instilled in us by fundamental institutions, such as families and schools and religious congregations. These institutions, these unseen pillars of civilization, must remain strong in America, and we will defend them. We must stand with our families to help them raise healthy, responsible children. When it comes to helping children make right choices, there is work for all of us to do.

...

A strong America must also value the institution of marriage. I believe we should respect individuals as we take a principled stand for one of the most fundamental, enduring institutions of our civilization. Congress has already taken a stand on this issue by passing the Defense of Marriage Act, signed in 1996 by President Clinton. That statute protects marriage under federal law as a union of a man and a woman, and declares that one state may not redefine marriage for other states.

Activist judges, however, have begun redefining marriage by court order, without regard for the will of the people and their elected representatives. On an issue of such great consequence, the people's voice must be heard. If judges insist on forcing their arbitrary will upon the people, the only alternative left to the people would be the constitutional process. Our nation must defend the sanctity of marriage.

The outcome of this debate is important — and so is the way we conduct it. The same moral tradition that defines marriage also teaches that each individual has dignity and value in God's sight. It's also important to strengthen our communities by unleashing the compassion of America's religious institutions. Religious charities of every creed are doing some of the most vital work in our country — mentoring children, feeding the hungry, taking the hand of the lonely. Yet government has often denied social service grants and contracts to these groups, just because they have a cross or a Star of David or a crescent on the wall.

By executive order, I have opened billions of dollars in grant money to competition that includes faith-based charities. Tonight I ask you to codify this into law, so people of faith can know that the law will never discriminate against them again.

Bush, G. W. (2004, January 20). State of the union address to the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, second session. Retrieved from [http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected\\_Speeches\\_George\\_W\\_Bush.pdf](http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf)